

Editorial

Of Scripture, Church and Civil Partnerships

Sometimes a debate which has raged for a long time is crystallised in a particular manner which shows that the subject has enormous ramifications. Such is the issue of the blessing of Civil Partnerships which is far more than an 'in house' Church of Scotland matter. Every time I write or speak on this issue of homosexuality I would rather be dealing with something else. Yet I want to demonstrate that this is one of the crucial issues of our time and stands at the hub of many other issues fundamental to the Gospel itself. Before doing so I want to say a word about my own involvement in this debate.

Some eleven years ago my Durham colleague Mark Bonnington and I were invited to write the first Grove booklet in the New Biblical Series and this appeared in 1996 as *Homosexuality and the Bible*. There we examined the biblical texts and, I hope, fairly and courteously but without apology demonstrated the Bible's unambiguous teaching that homosexual practice is wrong. I have found nothing over the intervening years to cause me to distance myself from what we said in that booklet. In St John's College in Durham and elsewhere I spoke and took part in seminars. On my return to Scotland I was again involved in the debate both as a member of the

steering group of 'Forward Together' and as a member of the Church of Scotland Working Party on Human Sexuality whose report is to be presented to the General Assembly of 2007. Why does this issue matter and why does the attempt of the Legal Questions Committee to enshrine the blessing of Civil Partnerships in the practice of the Church of Scotland matter not only to that church but to the whole church both in Scotland and elsewhere? I want to suggest reasons why this issue is vital and why we need to be continually vigilant.

The first is the nature of the Bible itself. A hermeneutic which has become increasingly popular is to take the words of Jesus in John 16:13: 'When he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth', as meaning that the Spirit will lead us into 'truth' which will replace and relativise the witness of Scripture. We are further told that Scripture (i.e. the Spirit himself) did not in biblical times anticipate committed, loving same-sex partnerships but now new truth is available to us. This is a classic example of trying to deduce theology from individual texts while ignoring their context. In the first place, these words are primarily addressed to the apostles (14:26 speaks of the Spirit specifically 'reminding'

CONTENTS

1	Editorial
4	What's So Special about Preaching? <i>David Jackman</i>
11	<i>The Da Vinci Code</i> Critique <i>Douglas Kelly</i>
17	Ministry in the New Global Culture of Major City-Centers <i>Tim Keller</i>
22	Preaching Apocalyptic Literature <i>Bob Fyall</i>
29	Ann Allen meets Gordon Kennedy
33	Book Reviews

them of Jesus' earthly life and 15:27 of their being with Jesus). Moreover, the Spirit's function is to make known the significance of the pivotal events of Jesus' incarnation, person, ministry, death, resurrection, ascension and coming. Through the church's ministry on this he will convict the world of sin, righteousness and judgement. The Spirit will never 'reveal' to us anything that contradicts the written Word. In the second place, the name given to the Spirit is 'Spirit of truth' which is plainly echoed in 17:17: 'Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.' What the Spirit did and continues to do is lead the disciples into 'all truth' which is truth already revealed uniquely and finally in Jesus to whom the written Word so faithfully points.

This is not the place to rehearse the Bible's teaching on sexuality; I have done this often enough, including in the booklet mentioned above. But two things can be said. The first is that we are not dealing with a few texts in Leviticus but with the whole sweep of biblical revelation. At the centre of creation is the union of a man and woman, the image of God, and this carries on throughout the Old Testament in the love of Yahweh for Israel, and continues in the New Testament with the love of Christ for the church, culminating in heaven with the wedding of the Lamb. Marriage is an acted parable to all eternity of the love of God for his people.

The second is that this debate is at the heart of the dispute on biblical authority. That makes it a defining issue between those who accept the Bible as supreme authority and those who do not. If we use some passages of Scripture to judge others then we are setting ourselves above the Bible and appealing to some other authority. This goes beyond the bounds of legitimate disagreement on biblical interpretation and sets up human reason and preference as the final arbiter.

The second main reason why this issue is important is because of the nature of the church. Two aspects of the church

...this is one of the crucial issues of our time...

are important for this discussion. The first is the holiness of the church. The church is not holy simply by reciting its belief in the one holy, catholic and apostolic church. It is Christ himself who sanctifies the church, and, significantly it is in Ephesians 5:26 that this very point is made and linked with the 'one flesh' of a man and a woman joined in marriage. As in the John 17 passage, already referred to, this cleansing involves the Word and cannot be effective without continual submission to that Word. If the church chooses to listen to the voice of the world rather than the voice of God it will not long remain holy.

The other aspect is the unity of the church. The vote at the General Assembly was very narrow: a majority of only eight for the Civil Partnerships' motion. But it is not so much the Church of Scotland alone as the unity of the church across the centuries and across the world. The statement on the Rutherford House website was notable for the support throughout the world and across the denominations. Not only was it signed by the elder statesmen of world evangelicalism, John Stott and Jim Packer, but by other well-known names from all over the world. Also Free Church Moderators, Pentecostal pastors, and the Roman Catholic bishop of Motherwell signed. The orthodox view is not that of a small fringe, it is the historic view of the church, whereas a minority, supported by the secular establishment, are trying to present their view as mainstream.

The third main concern is where this impinges on the nature of evangelism. It is sometimes argued that if we take an orthodox view on sexual relationships, people will be put off and will not listen. This may well be

true in some cases but it misses the point. Evangelism is a call to a total commitment to Christ which involves lifestyle and fundamental changes in attitude. We do no one any favours by trying to be more merciful and generous than God. We do not, of course, expect everyone to change all aspects of their lives the moment they come to Christ. But we do need to teach the Christian faith in all its unconditional grace, but show that grace 'teaches us to say "no" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age' (Titus 2:11). In other words what we are presenting in evangelism is not a self-help plan but grace which can transform and turn lives from being self-centred to being Christ-centred.

If the church simply echoes the world and has no distinctive stance, evangelism will simply evaporate into a general and vague pleasantness. There will be no call for repentance and faith, no realisation that fundamental change needs to happen. The world will be annoyed and indeed hostile but will respect us more for clear convictions and firm stances than for weak and compromising behaviour.

The fourth main issue is the nature of what it means to be human and the importance of marriage in society. The Genesis account of the creation of male and female in the image of God remains the pattern for human intimacy and the context in which to bring up children. Far too much contemporary thinking on sexuality concentrates simply on the gratification of adults and ignores the needs of children. Marriage is the bedrock of a godly society and attempts to diminish its importance and significance need to be resisted.

To be truly human is to reflect the way the Creator made humanity. Of course, we live in a fallen world and that means our sexuality is fallen as well, and this is true whether we are straight or gay. We need to be honest about our weaknesses and failures but that is not the same as lowering God's standards. But

honesty about weaknesses and failures is not the same as condoning what Scripture clearly condemns. When we fall into sin we need to return to the Lord in repentance and receive his forgiving grace. Homosexual activity is not the unforgivable sin, but like other sins it needs repentance. Acceptance of people often involves showing them where they are wrong and lovingly helping them to put that right.

Thus we are dealing here not with the internal affairs of a particular church and a simple matter of sorting out an anomaly, which is what the Legal Questions Committee of the Church of Scotland want to represent it as. Here we have something which touches on issues at the very heart of the Gospel: the nature of the Bible, of the church, of evangelism and of humanity.

One or two other matters still need to be considered. The first is the matter of freedom of conscience, which has always been exercised in every church, otherwise those appointed to any position would have to agree absolutely on every matter, great and small. In the present climate, however, liberty of conscience is being elevated from its proper place to becoming virtually a mandate for everyone doing what seems right to them. A reading of the later chapters of Judges would be a salutary exercise. Freedom of conscience must, like every other freedom, be governed by Scripture. If it is to be governed by what we feel appropriate or comfortable with, then we have simply set aside Scripture as our final authority.

Another question, rather obviously ignored by many participants in the debate, is the pastoral support of those who are gay by orientation but are living lives of celibacy by the grace of God. Ministry to them and support of them will be seriously undermined if ministers conduct blessings of civil partnerships. There are many such people who need our prayerful and practical support. Much fine work is done in this area by Martin Hallet and the

*Marriage is an
acted parable to
all eternity of the
love of God for his
people.*

True Freedom Trust, a ministry which has brought hope and comfort to many.

This is an issue where we need to highlight the positive and prophetic nature of the Gospel. We owe it to the people of our day to present faithfully and plainly that faith in Christ is never simply agreeing to certain propositions; the devil believes and trembles. Faith in Christ involves a clear and unambiguous commitment to the lifestyle and teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ. Decades of liberal theology and such preaching as it produces have emptied the churches and given the impression that we have nothing serious to say and no life-changing Gospel to offer.

The burden of this editorial is that we need to be loyal to the faith once delivered to us which is not for negotiation. We owe it to the Lord, to the church and to the world to speak clearly and faithfully. We need further to help each other to proclaim the message, live the life of faith and support each other to be faithful to him 'who called us out of darkness into his marvellous light'.

What's So Special about Preaching?

Inaugural EMA Address on Preaching

David Jackman

This year the Proclamation Trust is twenty years old – though the preaching conferences go back a good deal earlier – and the EMA itself pre-dates it by three years. We are fundamentally a single-issue concern, 'Preach the Word'. All our ministry is designed for the well-being of the Church and the spread of the gospel throughout the world, by encouraging, enabling and equipping pastor/teachers to keep at this central task, to make it their main commitment, their life work – to do it faithfully and to keep on keeping on, to pursue excellence in the work and to allow nothing to divert them from this greatest of all privileges and responsibilities:

Preach the Word! The Word is the content and preaching is what we do with it. In the goodness of God ministries have been changed, pulpits have been re-won for the exposition of Scripture and the preaching of the gospel, a new generation of devoted Biblical ministers has begun to emerge and its numbers and competence seem to be growing.

For all of this we should stop and praise God – to Him be the glory – and we should surely be thankful for our fellowship, opportunities and resources. And yet... we are barely holding our own. For every pulpit won, another seems to be lost, not necessarily to heresy, but to the Bible being relegated from the driving-seat to the passenger seat, where it makes a use-

ful companion, a map to be consulted from time to time, but does not really determine the direction of the car. For every new church plant, another faithful, evangelical church is in terminal decline. For every zealous young pastor, there is a wounded, discouraged, exhausted and quietly despairing older brother. For every growing church staff in the wealthy areas, there are single-handed brothers in less affluent parts of the country who, as one shared with me the other day, cannot even afford a secretary to help with his administration one day a week. Are we really right to be so obsessional about Biblical preaching? Or are we just hankering after a by-gone age? And if the spoken word is not passé, and if Scripture and experience both point to the continuing centrality of Biblical proclamation, how can we ensure that God's purposes for preaching are being fulfilled in what we are doing?

For if it is probably true that good preaching may not easily fill a church

these days, it is undeniably true that poor preaching will easily empty it! Let's read Luke 4:16-32. It establishes that the Lord Jesus was an expository preacher. He chooses a text from Isaiah 61 which focuses his ministry by repeating the verb 'to proclaim' (which is mentioned three times in verses 18-19):

'The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

This also identifies his person as the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy (v. 21: and he began by saying to them, 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.'). Here is Christ preaching Christ from Old Testament Scripture. But Jesus not only interprets Isaiah, he also interprets the Nazareth congregation. It's as though the sermon is like an ellipse with twin focal points – the Biblical text and the condition or situation of the hearers. There is a particular Nazarene focus and application, which Jesus introduces by his use of one of their contemporary proverbs –

(v. 23: Jesus said to them, 'Surely you will quote this proverb to me: "Physician, heal yourself! Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum"'). At one level the message is received so well (v. 22a: 'All spoke well of him and were

Preach the Word!

***The word is the
content and
preaching is what
we do with it.***

amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips') but at the deeper level it is profoundly rejected (v. 22b: "Isn't this Joseph's son?" they asked').

So Scripture is used to interpret Scripture. 1 Kings 17 and 2 Kings 5 are brought into play to interpret their reaction to Isaiah's proclamation (an observed Biblical pattern which explains the present) – and so the unbelief of their hearts is laid bare, with very predictable consequences (vv. 28-29: 'All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him down the cliff. But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way').

A successful sermon? Drummed out of town? Oh yes, totally effective (vv. 31-32: 'Then he went down to Capernaum, a town in Galilee, and on the Sabbath began to teach the people. They were amazed at his teaching, because his message had authority'). That authority had been proclaimed – and in Nazareth hearts were hardened, just as some in Capernaum began to soften. Faithful teaching ministries harden as well as soften hearts. This is why well-taught churches can seem suddenly to collapse when a faithful ministry comes to an end. There has been tacit resistance alongside positive acceptance. Now do you see how this cuts right across so many of our presuppositions about the preaching task and how it exposes the alarming extent of our cultural accommodation as 21st century preachers?

I want to suggest that we need to carry out a virus check, to see where our own thinking is less than Biblical, and why that affects our practice so deeply. Look back over the past three months. Does your diary reflect your affirmed priorities? We all know we are called to the ministry of the Word and to prayer. We call our people to it as the heart of their daily devotion to the Lord – but are they not often the

hardest things actually to prioritize in our busy, busy lives? Now I'm not here either to initiate a guilt-trip, or to pretend that we should be untroubled by such pressures. But I do want us to be realists and explore why the priorities to which we give lip-service so often get squeezed out of that position in practice. How much time do we spend in preparation and in prayer? And how do you use it? There are powerful issues at work in the culture and in the church and I think it may be helpful to take a few moments to step back and look at ourselves, our time and our energy, what they are spent on, and why, and what returns are we getting? What are the perhaps unrecognized presuppositions on which we are actually building our ministries?

I. In the culture.

Of course there is nothing new under the sun. 414 years ago a book was published by William Perkins entitled *The Art of Prophecyng* ('Preaching' we would say). In it Perkins lamented the scarcity of true Biblical ministers, a truth, he says, which is self-evident from the experience of all ages. He laments that few men of quality seek the calling of the ministry and even says that of those with the title very few deserve the honourable names of messenger (angel) and interpreter. And he traces this to three causes :-

(i) The contempt with which the calling is treated – Biblical ministry is hated by the world because it reveals sin and unmasks hypocrisy.

In a culture which finds it hard to cope with seriousness, there is a distaste and distrust of anything which sounds earnest

(ii) The difficulty of discharging the duties – the care and charge of souls, to be the one who speaks to God on behalf of the people and to the people on behalf of God is an overwhelming responsibility.

(iii) The inadequacy of financial recompense and status. Who would accept the contempt and the difficulties for such a poor reward? Instead, Perkins says, the sharpest minds of our day turn to the law. And that was in 1592!

But while we are not unique in 2006, we do have particular cultural pressures at work, as the world seeks to squeeze us into its mould and is often subtly successful in ways we hardly realise, let alone admit. Where the Reformation regarded preaching as 'the source and spring of Christian faith', now it is marginalized and then rejected. The arguments may be familiar, but important because the virus is highly contagious and it very readily lurks in our sub-conscious minds.

(1) *Preaching is presumptuous* – in an age when the Church is no longer central to the fabric of society and has lost its credibility. For one person to instruct others about matters of belief or behaviour is unwarranted arrogance ('Don't preach at me!'). It smacks of the pompous, the self-important. In a culture which finds it hard to cope with seriousness, there is a distaste and distrust of anything which sounds earnest.

(2) *So, preaching is naïve* – because there is no Truth, only many individual stories. Advertising/marketing has destroyed the credibility of testimony. Would you buy double glazing on your doorstep? How do we know that Christian opinion hasn't been produced by manipulation? How can the same old Biblical agenda be relevant to our world of revolutionary development and change? Preaching only addresses one of our senses – hearing. It follows a limited linear mode of thought – it lacks immediacy.

(3) *Preaching is ineffective* – Most of the congregation cannot reproduce

accurately the contents of a sermon even immediately afterwards. It is lacking in reciprocity/dialogue. There are the inevitable limitations of one person's point of view, even with Power Point! Preaching is an introverted activity; it privatizes religion. And it is frequently boring, which raises questions about the commitment and integrity of the preacher. If he's boring me, he is probably boring himself. Does he believe and live what he proclaims? Does he live in the house of his dogmas? Where is his own centre of gravity?

Arguments like these chip away constantly at our confidence as preachers. Totally focussed on human wisdom and criteria – God is left out! The virus spreads through the system.

And so the church itself propagates their development, in its structures and accepted norms, which constitute a downgrading of preaching. We shall find these much harder to identify and accept because we have become so used to them.

II. In the church

i.) A downgrading of expectation.

There is a 'Spurgeon story' that when he was approached by a young preacher who complained of his own comparative ineffectiveness, he asked him, 'Do you really expect God to work every time you preach?' The young man replied, 'Oh no! Of course not!' Spurgeon answered, 'That is why nothing happens!'

'Do you really expect...' I wonder if we have so over-reacted to the mystical and the subjective-emotional in preaching that we see it now in terms of dispensing Biblical knowledge rather than pleading with God in prayer and men in proclamation to change lives

in time for eternity. 'Preach the Word' has become 'Explain the Bible'. There is a difference. Systematic theology is essential. Biblical theology in the whole sweep of the Bible's big picture from Genesis to Revelation, in Kingdom and covenant, is deeply enriching. But they are not the way God wrote the Bible and to let them govern the sermon, rather than the text of Scripture as written, is to end up speaking about the Bible rather than letting the Bible speak. One is the words of men; the other the Word of God. Not observing the text, but listening to God; not cool analysts, but passionate hearers.

Perhaps there is a confusion here between the church and the academy. The better the preacher's theological training – and we thank God for the splendid developments in this area over the last 20 years or so – the more he is likely to want to emulate the seminary in the pulpit, and to want the church to be a sort of Christian university. Let me trace this through a little because I think it's a real issue. We tend to quote 2 Timothy 2:2, 'What you have heard from me entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also' and apply it to the man of God, the pastor-teacher and his congregation. But I had a very stimulating conversation with Dr Mervyn Elof in South Africa a few months ago, where he suggested that Timothy might be an example of the apostolic delegate, rather than a model of the local church pastor-teacher, or elder. Timothy's task would then be to raise up pastor-teachers, to discover and train them, and that would in turn be part of their task, perhaps. But that is not the primary focus of the local church. If we want to see Paul spelling that out, it's in Acts 20 to the Ephesian elders as he passes

on the baton of local church leadership in these terms, 'Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock...be shepherds of the church of God' (v. 28) and we know from the Lord Jesus himself that this means feeding his sheep and tending the flock (John 21). The origin of these instructions goes right back to Ezekiel 34 where (a) Yahweh condemns the shepherds who think the flock exists for them (v. 2); (b) Yahweh himself decrees 'I will seek out my sheep... I will rescue them... I will feed them with good pasture... I will bring back the strayed... bind up the injured... strengthen the weak' – that is Christ's ministry; that is the pastor's task, through his Word ministry. We certainly want to lift the level of training in our churches, but that isn't what the church is for. It's a subtle difference. The field hospital is a more Biblical model than the university seminar rooms, but it is still the Word that does the work. We would be in danger of seeing the church as the focus for ministry practice, so that the training agenda dominates everything else.

This might account for the common complaint that well-trained evangelical preachers are often boring, or that what is said from the pulpit doesn't connect with real life, or that we are 'not being fed', in the sense of being helped to live effective Christian lives. Now it could be argued that if we have small group Bible studies, or develop one-on-one discipleship training ministries (both of which are excellent, of course) we don't need preaching so much, especially pastoral preaching. People will be taught the Bible in their groups. However, in practice this is to put a huge load on the comparatively untrained shoulders of the group leaders, however well we may try to equip them. In many churches the leader is not expected to fulfil a leadership teaching role – more the chair of a discussion without any significant authority. In others there is a lack of theological acumen and pastoral wisdom, which means the discussion is severely limited, and people's questions are often

...speaking about the Bible, rather than letting the Bible speak. One is the words of men; the other the Word of God

dismissed as irrelevant diversions, red herrings. Some groups become a pooling of ignorance and others processing and formulaic. The answer lies in the preaching, which can and should achieve so much more than the best trained home groups, for these reasons:

- (1) The messenger has been trained and equipped to preach;
- (2) The whole congregation is addressed so that the corporate content of Scripture is heard by them as a community;
- (3) The church is therefore led from the pulpit by the proclamation of the Word.

(ii) A downgrading of the calling.

If our expectations of preaching are lowered, then the sense of the preacher being uniquely gifted and commissioned by God will tend to disappear with it. Because we are rightly suspicious of subjectivism, which sees a mystical authorization of ministry in special circumstances or verses called 'a call', we have tended to swing to the opposite extreme and imply that anyone of reasonable intelligence and godly inclination can 'do ministry'. Of course we all have a ministry to fulfil and in that sense every Christian is 'in ministry', but it is misleading to imagine that everyone can do everything. The charismata of the New Testament are giftings from God himself and there does need to be objective attestation to their existence, coupled with an inner constraint of the Holy Spirit that this is the work God has given me to do.

This is what constitutes 'the call', which I believe is needed for full-time ministry – and it would seem that aptness to teach is one of the essential ingredients. If we take this seriously, it will mean that the person and work of the Holy Spirit is absolutely central to the task. If the gifts of Word ministry are 'empowered by the one Spirit who apportions to each one individually as he wills' (1 Cor. 12:11), then those whom he has not gifted will not know his empowering in that area. This has important implications for the many

ministry schemes and apprenticeship schemes, which we rejoice to see multiplying around the country. There is perhaps a danger that they can produce a conveyor-belt, by which a young graduate can move to church leadership and ordination, without there ever being a real assessment of his ability and giftedness as a preacher. Because the needs are great and we want to multiply the workforce greatly, we may be tempted to cut corners and assume that everyone who can do personal work and lead a group Bible study well should be 'in ministry'. But Matthew 9:38 does remind us, 'Pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.' It is his harvest, not ours. Only he can gift and equip effective labourers. We may send people out to do a job, but are they actually the chief harvester's workforce? This is a very important issue for the future health and welfare of our congregations. Biblical knowledge may be conveyed faithfully and engagingly, but what will be lacking is an encounter with the living God. And where the gifting is present, there will still need to be a deep dependence on the power of the Holy Spirit in answer to prayer, to quicken the dead and to edify the saints, to convince, instruct, rebuke and correct. So we say to ourselves as we climb the pulpit steps, 'I believe in the Holy Spirit...' That priority is reflected by:

- (1) Prayer in the preparation (for clarity, faithfulness and relevant application);
- (2) Prayer for the proclamation (the exposition and structure); and
- (3) Prayer for the congregation (a love for people, asking ourselves, 'What must I preach from this passage to them?').

As Jesus reminded his disciples, 'Without me, you can do nothing.' (John 15: 5) You can preach a sermon and get by – even be approved and applauded but the eternal yield is nothing. God's most effective method of reaching the whole congregation with the life-changing Word is effectively neutralized if we are not totally dependent on the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Preaching is central to this calling, as it was in Christ's own ministry, from whom all authentic ministry is derived. In Karl Barth's definition in his *Homiletics* 'Preaching is the attempt enjoined upon the Church to serve God's own Word, through one who is called thereto, by expounding a Biblical text in human words and making it relevant to contemporaries, in intimation of what they have to hear from God Himself.'

(iii) A downgrading of the preacher.

By this I mean that there are strong pressures to see preaching as 'one of the things I do' in ministry, but not its heart-beat, not its indispensable core. The argument runs like this: 'I'm not especially gifted as a preacher. Others can do it much better than I can and anyway all the study that is required demands a price, in terms of time, that I can't afford.

So I'll go to one of the websites, download a really good sermon, tweak it a bit with an illustration or two and make it my own.' Nothing new under the sun. Do you know that old limerick,

*There once was a preacher called Spurgy
who had little time for liturgy but
his sermons are fine so I use them as
mine and so do the rest of the clergy?*

So what's wrong with that? A great deal! The Word isn't in the preacher, because the preacher isn't in the Word – and

If we take this seriously, it will mean that the person and work of the Holy Spirit is absolutely central to the task.

Do we still tremble at the awesome responsibility of the task - so few minutes to preach, invested with such eternal potential, for gain or loss?

instead of heart-to-heart proclamation you have a ministry of performance.

The actor – the mask – the hypocrite. All very much culturally approved and appreciated, but barren of the power and presence of God. Listen to Calvin preaching in Sermon XXII on 1 Timothy 3:2 'apt to teach': 'For St Paul does not mean that one should just make a parade here or that a man should show off so that everyone applauds him and says "Oh! Well-spoken! Oh! What a breadth of learning! Oh! What a subtle mind!" All that is beside the point... When a man has climbed up into the pulpit, is it so that he may be seen from afar, and that he may be pre-eminent? Not at all. It is that God may speak to us by the mouth of a man.' (T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin's Preaching*, (Westminster/John Knox 1992 p. 24).

Do we have a high enough view of the office of the preacher (not of ourselves)? Do we still tremble at the awesome responsibility of the task – so few minutes to preach, invested with such eternal potential, for gain or loss?

Calvin again:

'It is certain that if we come to church we shall not hear only a mortal man speaking but we shall feel (even by his [God's] secret power) that God is speaking to our souls, that he is the teacher. He so touches us that the human voice enters into us and so profits us that we are refreshed and nourished by it.' (*Op. cit.*, p.42)

In his book T. H. L. Parker concludes, from a wide trawl of the sermons and the Institutes, that there are three or four dominant aims in Calvin's many references to the primacy of preach-

ing: to honour God, to reform lives, to witness to truth and to present salvation. All this can be summed up in the one over-all concept of 'edification' – with the New Testament sense of construction or building – with Christ himself as the one foundation.

So what is so special about preaching? What antibodies do we need to develop to ward off these crippling cultural infections? The New Testament has the answer. It is the result of preaching and is itself a form of preaching. Do you remember how Luke begins his Gospel with reference to 'those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants (ministers) of the Word' (1:2)? The message communicated is the Word of the Lord and that is what gives birth to and lies at the heart of God's covenant community. There are basic Biblical principles here of which we need to be 100% convinced. The community of God's people is to meet together regularly, and not to neglect this primary means of grace (Heb. 10: 25). The roots of that go back to the origins of Israel. Where do you first find congregational preaching in Scripture? At the very formation of the nation.

The book of Exodus is central to Old Testament Scripture and is the essential primer in covenant theology. Central to the book is the redeemed nation gathered at Sinai; 19:1 – 24:11 is the controlling section. Their identity as a nation is forged as they are called together to listen to the voice of God in the ten Words, to respond in obedience to their covenant Lord and to seal their agreement, with the blood of sacrifice, in the covenant ratification ceremony. Either side of the Law as given in

chapters 20 – 23, there are sermons/preaching. In chapter 19 Moses is given the Lord's Word to preach to the people concerning the nature of his covenant grace in redemption, which creates their identity as God's special possession (treasure-chest) and commits them to obey his voice and keep his covenant, so as to enter into all the blessings of the covenant mercy. In chapter 24 after the giving of the Law, 'Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD and all the rules. And all the people answered with one voice and said "All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do" (24:3). The book of the covenant is written and then proclaimed as the fore-runner to the covenant ratification. Worshipping the LORD means listening to his Word, with its declarations and explanations, and then committing oneself to a life of trust and obedience, appropriating covenant grace to live distinctively different lives. This is the beginning of expository preaching. The Torah is not merely a code for determining sin and judging the wicked. It is much more the basis of guiding the righteous, expounding the way of life for God's redeemed people which is in accordance with his character and will.

So it is hardly surprising that the book of Deuteronomy is a series of expository sermons preached on the Torah before the entry to the land. It is the establishment of a Biblical pattern, a pattern which continues with the Prophets, who are preachers of the Torah, to the specific circumstances of the covenant community in their day, and sometimes to the unbelieving world, through the Wisdom tradition and on into what became the post-exilic synagogues. Its pattern is confirmed by Nehemiah 8, where the reading and exposition of the Torah leads to repentance, worship and covenant renewal. And that became the established template for synagogue practice. A set lesson from the Torah and a lesson from the Prophets (chosen by the speaker, as did Jesus in Nazareth) and an exposition of the texts, understood through-

out the inter-testamental period as the continuation of the prophetic ministry. That's why the Council of Jerusalem concludes with James' pronouncement in Acts 15:21, 'From ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues.' Reading and proclamation of the Word are the central activity. It explains why Paul goes first to the synagogue and why apostolic preaching is regarded as God speaking: The Word of the LORD.

It is striking that this term 'Word' which Paul and the other apostles are very happy to use about Old Testament revelation, they also appropriate to their own preaching. The Thessalonians received the word in much affliction, but it also came 'in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction' (1 Thes. 1:5-6). Indeed 'when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as what it really is, the word of God' (2:13). That's the high status of apostolic preaching. The claim is profound. God himself speaks through the words of Paul. The word of God is a genitive of ownership, meaning that God's voice is heard in the preaching of the apostles. But what about our preaching? Could we ever say that our preaching has that sort of authority – can it be an encounter with the living God? Of course we are not to be equated with the unique apostolate who were eyewitnesses of the risen Lord and directly commissioned by him, even Paul 'as one untimely born'. We believe because of their testimony. But does the fact that we are recipients of revelation (second-hand knowledge, if you like) mean that our preaching is only human words and bound therefore to be second-rate? One interesting pointer is that Paul doesn't seem to differentiate between the quality, or authority, or effectiveness of his apostolic proclamation and the preaching of his fellow-workers. There are interesting hints. For example, 1 Corinthians 16:10: 'When Timothy comes, see that you put him at ease among you,

The inescapable implication is that Christ speaks in the proclamation of scripture - and for the preacher that is both the most amazing privilege and the most overwhelming responsibility

for he is doing the work of the Lord, as I am.' No apostolic differentiation in Word ministry. In 1 Thessalonians 3: 2 Timothy is 'our brother and God's co-worker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith' – both evangelism and edification. In the pastorals and especially 2 Timothy he is passed the baton of ministry with the same priorities and practice Paul had. This is the true apostolic succession. That was what led the Reformers to affirm (2nd Helvetic Confession) 'When Scripture is now preached in the Church by preachers lawfully called [those are the safeguards!] we believe that the very Word of God (*ipsum dei verbum*) is proclaimed and received by the faithful.'

Attacked by rationalism (in the 18th century), liberalism (in the 19th century), scepticism (in the 20th century) and now postmodernism (in the 21st century) can we still have that sort of confidence in preaching? Yes, if the preacher is proclaiming the Word of God in Scripture. There the voice of God is truly heard. Its efficacy is neither determined nor limited by the spiritual or technical quality of the preacher. It is God who speaks through the lips of men, which means that Scripture is, in the phrase of H. O. Old, 'the fixed norm for preaching, and exposition the only valid method'. But the other ingredient, the other focal point of the ellipse is equally vital. It is not just repetition of Scripture or even careful exposition alone. It has, in Old's words, to be 'actualized', skilfully and powerfully directed towards the hearers and their situations. 'Congregations are not passive buckets to be pumped

into' (Tillstrom). All good preaching is essentially dialogical – in two senses:

- (1) between the preacher and the congregation so that what is said is weighed and tested; and
- (2) but also between God and the people (including the preacher) so that what is heard is believed and obeyed and so the God who speaks is loved and worshipped.

As Jim Packer states: 'The proper aim of preaching is to mediate meetings with God' (J. I. Packer, *Truth and Power* (Eagle Publishing (1996)). See Chapter 5, *Mouthpiece for God*. And in order for that to happen application needs to adhere (Jim Packer suggests) to three guidelines.

(a) It should constantly focus on the unchanging realities of each person's relationship to God – including 'faith, love, hope, obedience; humility, repentance, forgiveness, fidelity; thankful praise and trustful prayer; stewarding gifts, sanctifying one's activities, serving others and standing against evil in one's own heart and in the world outside'. (Op. cit., p.148) It's about living a Christian life, walking with God.

(b) Application should constantly focus on the place and person of Jesus Christ:

'Jesus my Shepherd, Husband, Friend my Prophet, Priest and King; my Lord, my Life, my Way, my End.'

(c) Application should constantly search the hearts and consciences of the hearers – it must 'come home' in a penetrating way and personally to as many as possible in the congregation.

In conclusion, Romans 10:8-17 tells us: But what does it say? 'The word

is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart,' that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. As the Scripture says, 'Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame'. For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile – the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.' How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!' But not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, 'Lord, who has believed our message?' Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.

'What does it [the righteousness based on faith – from verse 6] say?' This is as much God's unchanging Word, for every generation, including ours, as is the magisterial exposition of the gospel in chapters 1 – 8. The righteousness based on faith says that it is engendered by preaching – or rather that what God does in bringing men and women to new life he does in and through preaching. *Fideo et auditu* (faith and hearing). This is the ever-present, always living Word of God in the gospel – on the lips in the confession that Jesus is Lord and in the heart in the belief that God raised him from the dead (vv. 8-9). But Paul's point is that universal availability (vv. 11-13) requires universal proclamation (v. 14). That sort of proclamation is divinely commissioned ('sent' v. 15). Not just individual Christian witness, but public proclamation of the whole counsel of God. The forward movement of the gospel, and the resultant

growth and health of the Church does not depend on communication techniques, or rhetoric, or human wisdom or human power, not on mass psychology or clever marketing – it depends on the proclamation of the Truth, in season and out of season, whether they will hear or not. God himself is reaching out to people in the faithful preaching of his Word and this is such a task as demands the whole life of the preacher – called, set apart, equipped, consecrated and sent out. It is a life of immense privilege, grounded in ongoing sacrifice. But verse 14 inexorably leads to verse 17. The inescapable implication is that Christ speaks in the proclamation of Scripture – and for the preacher that is both the most amazing privilege and the most overwhelming responsibility. That is why we give ourselves to the ministry of the Word and to prayer. I close with a quote from John Piper's excellent book *The Supremacy of God in Preaching* (Baker Book House (1990)). Cotton Mather, the New England puritan, said, 'The great design and intention of the office of a Christian preacher [is] to restore the throne and dominion of God in the souls of men.' As John Piper comments, 'The key question is: What does the preacher herald? What is the good news referred to here [Romans 10: 14-15]?'

Since verse 16 is a quotation of Isaiah 52:7, we do well to go back and let Isaiah define it for us... The good tidings of the preacher, the peace and salvation that he publishes, are boiled down into one sentence: 'Your God Reigns!' Mather applies this, with full justification, to the preacher. 'The great design... of a Christian preacher [is] to restore the throne and dominion of God in the souls of men.' So, brothers, 'Preach the Word!'

The Da Vinci Code

Critique

Douglas Kelly

I. Why this review of a book and film?

I have been in the ordained Christian ministry for almost forty years, and this is the first time I have ever gone to the trouble to give a serious review of a book (and film that came from it). Why bother with such a thing, since my main calling is to expound the Word of God? Let me mention briefly four reasons: (1) the great popularity of Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*; (2) its serious attack on basic Christianity; (3) answers are easy to find, if we know where to look; (4) this attack gives Christians a good opportunity for witness.

(1) The great popularity of this book

The Da Vinci Code was quickly (in 2003) number one on the *New York Times* best-seller list; it became number one with every major best-seller list in the United States, and has been translated into more than forty languages. It has sold more than six million hardback copies. The film is being produced by well-known producer Ron Howard (who played 'Oppie' in the *Andy Griffith* show years ago). Whereas Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (which held to the divinity of Christ) was fiercely resisted by the establishment media, this film which

denies Christ's Deity will be pushed by the secularist media establishment.

(2) Its serious attack against Christianity

This book and film attack the very vitals of Christian belief; if they are right, Christianity must be profoundly wrong and a massive deception – which is what the book's major characters, Professor Robert Landon and Sir Leigh Teabing constantly assert. One review of this book (by Olson and Miesel) noted that this novel consists of over 20% lecture or preaching; and this preaching is almost totally against Biblical Christianity.¹ Generally, good novels do not consist of preaching or lecturing; but that is what this book does, with almost no character development of the major figures in it. Thus, even apart from its message, even the literary form of the book is very weak, as far as decent literature is concerned.

How serious is this attack? David Klinghoffer, writing in the *National Review*, states: 'What's at stake in *The Da Vinci Code* is nothing less than traditional Christianity itself...The founder of Christianity had a daughter, Sarah, by Mary Magdalene. If true, this theory would overturn some of the central beliefs of Christianity.'²

Garlow and Jones, authors of *Cracking the Da Vinci Code*, rightly say: '*The Da Vinci Code* uses a fictional structure to get its own message across. While seeming to advocate a courageous search for truth at any price, its real goal is to erode one of the fundamental characteristics of the Christian faith – the belief that the original message of the Gospel, enshrined in the Bible, is the unique, inspired word from God Himself, without which we are lost.'³ They also note that '*The Da Vinci Code* is a powerful form of religious propaganda. In an interview on ABC's 20/20 Dan Brown spoke about his "conversion" to a new way of thinking about the origins of Christianity. He also admitted that he saw himself as being on a mission to bring this religious message to mainstream America'.⁴

They add: 'It is a propaganda piece for a religious worldview... It is at this deep level that the book's attack on Christianity is the most vicious. We must, of course, answer its digs at the Bible and the authentic Jesus. However, the real significance of the book is its clear intention to undermine the very foundation of biblical faith and to establish in its place an opposing religious system'.⁵

I can summarize these attacks here very briefly; Brown (through his fictional characters) denies the deity of Jesus Christ, the truth of the Scriptures, the validity of the Church

and the sexual morality given to the human race by God. These are no small matters, and deserve a response.

(3) Answers are easy to find

The good news is that answers to these preposterous claims are readily at hand. Some matters are very complex and difficult for scholars to handle, but these attacks are easily answered by any decent scholar. You will find out what I mean as we go along in this address, so I will not give a preview of these easy to find answers here. But basically, we shall see that the well-known, widely accepted literary history of the ancient New Testament texts, and the history of the development of the Christian Church makes the false scholarship of Brown's claims very clear.

(4) An opportunity

Given, as I hope to show you, that there are ready responses to the non-scholarly claims of *The Da Vinci Code*, this book and film could be thought of as providing Christians with an opportunity for witness to who Jesus Christ really is. Mel Gibson's believing film gave us an opportunity in a very different way, but this attack on the Lord and His Church could also open real opportunities for evangelism with those who normally would not like to discuss such things. It can constitute an opportunity *if* we do some homework, and that is precisely why we are writing this paper. So, I see the outcome of all this positively rather than negatively, *assuming* we put in enough study to do what Peter told us: 'be ready to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear' (1 Pet. 3:15).

Along these lines of witness to an unbelieving (or at least, confused) world, let me mention two excellent resources, to which I have already referred. One is by evangelical Protestant scholars, Garlow and Jones, *Cracking the Da Vinci Code*, and the other is by Roman Catholic scholars, Olson and Miesel, *The Da Vinci Hoax*.

Both critiques are based on solid scholarship and provide the sort of clearly understandable answers that Christian people need today on this newest attack on Christianity. I am making much use of them in this paper.

II. Now let us look at Brown's Story

As we have seen, he uses a fast-moving murder mystery to convey his religious message. What is this story? Let me preface the story here by saying that although the novel is very weak in its almost total lack of credible character development – since its actors are mostly somewhat empty 'talking heads', whose conversation attempts to replace the worship of the Holy Trinity and redeemed, holy lives with pagan goddess worship and free sexuality; yet, at the same time, I definitely found the murder mystery, and especially the continual escaping of the French police interesting; a story that held my attention (although it petered out near the end). If it had not been fairly interesting, it would not have sold so many books – even apart from its anti-Christian message, which is what so many secularists are longing to hear.

Here is the story-line. It all begins with a grisly murder in the Louvre Museum in Paris. A half-crazed albino monk (supposedly of the conservative *Opus Dei* order, which wants to hide the so-called Da Vinci code that would expose the immoral origins of Christianity) kills the curator of the Louvre, Jacques Sauniere. Sauniere is also the Master of the secret Priory of Sion, a society that engages in sexual rituals and protects the secret of the Holy Grail, that would undo Christian belief in the deity of Christ. Supposedly the *Opus Dei* sent the crazy assassin to kill this scholar before he could reveal this secret that would destroy Christianity.

Sauniere's death by shooting left him several minutes to leave some clues around his body. He shaped himself in the occult form of a pentagram, and wrote some obscure messages below his dying body. These messages were rid-

dles about the Da Vinci Code and the Holy Grail. Also he left the name of Harvard professor of symbology, Robert Langdon, who is in Paris. Langdon was falsely accused of this murder, and is brought by the police to the murder scene in the Louvre. He is joined there by Sophie Neveu, an expert with the police on the meaning of symbols, and also – strangely enough – the estranged grand-daughter of Jacques Sauniere. Sophie secretly warns Langdon that the police are about to arrest him, and so together this couple make a successful escape, both from the Louvre and then from the chateau of an eccentric English Lord, Sir Leigh Teabing, who is a passionate expert of Holy Grail lore. Teabing turns out to be the villain, who is the secret 'teacher' who is behind these murders (that of Sauniere and of three other knowledgeable experts of the Priory of Sion).

Just before the crazy monk, Silas, is able to kill them at Teabing's mansion, and just before the French police nab them, they make another successful escape to England in Teabing's private jet. In England, they find out the truth: Teabing is the villain, who tries to kill them in Westminster Abbey. But he is caught by the police, and the hero, Langdon and his soon-to-be girl friend, Sophie, are recognized as innocent, and then follow the clues of the Da Vinci Code (from papers they retrieved from an old stone container) up to Rosslyn Chapel near Edinburgh, where in fact they meet Sophie's true grandmother and brother. At last, Langdon follows the clues back to the glass pyramid of the Louvre, where he has some kind of religious experience, and falls down to worship the bones of Mary Magdalene, the true founder of proper religion. We are told that later Langdon and Sophie will consummate their new romance in Florence (Italy, not South Carolina!).

In my view, the aspect of the story that holds one's attention is the clever and exciting escapes from assassins and from the police. I enjoyed those parts of the otherwise thin story line and absence of credible characters. So what

is this famous Da Vinci Code? I must make short work of it. Basically, Brown pretends (following a 1982 novel, *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* by Baigent, Leigh and Lincoln) that Leonardo Da Vinci's 'Last Supper' in the monastery at Milan really portrays not the apostle John, but Mary Magdalene, next to Jesus. This is said to be a clue that Mary Magdalene is the true continuer of the Christian Church, not the holy apostles. The holy grail is not the cup from which Christ drank; it is rather the womb of Mary Magdalene, whom he later impregnates with a daughter, Sarah, from whom the French kings are said to be descended, particularly in a line that goes down to Jacques Sauniere and his granddaughter, Sophie Neveu, whom the Priory of Sion is committed to protect from being murdered by the Church.

Now many people react to all this by saying: 'it is just a story. Why should the church be upset at an innocent murder mystery/romance?' But listen to what Dan Brown himself said on NBC's *Today Show* about it: 'Matt Lauer: How much of this is based on reality in terms of things that actually occurred? Dan Brown: Absolutely all of it. Obviously, Robert Langdon is fictional, but all of the art, architecture, secret rituals, secret societies – all of that is historical fact.'⁶

Since he claims that these aspects of his book are true, and since these claims would destroy the truth of Holy Scripture, particularly the Lordship and Saviourhood of Christ, let us seek to answer just a few of them. For the sake of time, let me isolate only two points: (1) The Last Supper of Da Vinci and its supposed clue to the marriage of Jesus and Mary Magdalene, and (2) the supposedly ancient Priory of Sion.

(1) Da Vinci's 'Last Supper' and the relationship of Mary Magdalene and Jesus

This is the core of Brown's attacks against Christianity (and he took it from the earlier book, *The Templar*

Revelation). He claims that in this famous portrait, the figure to the right of Christ is Mary Magdalene, not John. But several accredited art scholars (who are quoted in Olson and Miesel), scholars who are not necessarily Christian, state that 'the identity of the three apostles to Jesus' right has never been in doubt.'⁷ According to them: 'There is also physical evidence. A parish church of Ponte Capriasca near Lake Lugano contains a mid-seventeenth fresco copy of *The Last Supper*. On that fresco are the names of the twelve apostles, left to right...'⁸ And it is John, not Mary, who is beside Jesus. There is also an earlier sketch of this scene by Leonardo, which clearly shows John in this position.⁹ So to claim that Leonardo was really portraying Mary instead of John is totally contrary to fact, according to competent art historians.

Also, totally contrary to fact is the claim that Jesus was secretly married to Mary Magdalene. Obviously, there is nothing of this in the Biblical records. And also it is absent from all of the much later Gnostic writings (to be discussed in a few minutes) with the sole exception of an unclear passage in the fictitious *Gospel of Philip*. Let me summarize much information on this point by quoting from Olson and Miesel: 'Brown's interpretation of the Gnostic texts does not align with that of the vast majority of scholars working in the field...Most scholars agree that those attempting to construct a picture of early Christianity based on Mary Magdalene as Jesus' wife and head apostle must do so by subjectively picking and choosing elements from second- and third-century writings, then project them back to the first century.'¹⁰ In particular, the heretical and late *Gospel of Philip* does indeed call Mary Magdalene 'the companion of the Lord', but careful study shows that (as used in the New Testament texts) 'companion' refers to relationships that are non-sexual.¹¹

Why would orthodox Christians object to the theory that Jesus had a secret wife and had a child by her? Let me

mention two major reasons. First, who God is, and secondly, what is the relationship of Christ to His Church. First, who is God? The most important thing we can know about the eternal God is that He has always existed as a Holy Trinity. Within this Trinity there is only one Father, one Son and one Holy Spirit, who – as the Shorter Catechism rightly says – are 'the same in substance, equal in power and glory'. But if Jesus married and became a father, there would be two Fathers in the Trinity, rather than One; and the whole unity of the Trinity would be broken.

Secondly, what is the relationship of Christ to His Church? Yes, Christ does have a wife, but only one wife. He is not a polygamist! The Church (which is in continuity with Old Testament Israel) is the bride, and Christ is the heavenly Bridegroom. See Ephesians 5 and Revelation 19 and 21, which speak of this, both now and in its future aspects.

(2) The Priory of Sion

This pretendedly ancient secret society is in no sense ancient. It was only invented by a Frenchman named Pierre Plantard in 1956! He spuriously invented a list of names of former Grand Masters, such as Botticelli, Sir Isaac Newton, Victor Hugo and others. He served time in jail for fraud and embezzlement in the 1950s.¹² Paul Smith wrote on the internet: 'The whole history of the Priory of Sion is one of deception and confidence trickery – it was a fake society that never existed.'¹³

Let us now pass from these details to take a larger look at what seems to be Brown's underlying program in his *Da Vinci Code*:

III. Brown's Underlying Program

What Brown wishes to do is to replace apostolic Christianity by a pagan goddess worship that frees people from feeling guilty about sin; that frees them from any obligation to the Lord God Almighty, and in so doing, sets them free to pursue unrestrained sexuality. Garlow and Jones do not exaggerate

when they write: 'This view of sexuality [i.e. as in Brown's interpretation of Leonardo's Mona Lisa as androgynous] makes homosexuality normal, as *The Da Vinci Code* indicates in its celebration of da Vinci's gay identity. It even makes pansexuality – that is, all forms of sexuality – normal...'¹⁴

But to achieve this goal of guiltless free sexual activity it is necessary to be liberated from God and His law, the existence of whose Holiness makes sinner feel guilty. Although the existence and obligations from God are witnessed to in the creation and in our consciences, the clearest testimony to His holy Being and to our obligations to Him are found in Holy Scripture. Thus, to get rid of the Jewish/Christian God, one has to downgrade the truth-claims of Scripture. *The Da Vinci Code* tries to accomplish this by attacking the validity and uniqueness of the *canon* of Holy Scripture: in this case, that of the New Testament.

By *canon* is meant authoritative list of what books are received by the universal Christian Church as inspired by God, and thus as conveying infallibly His written Word to His people for all time. Canon means something like norm or rule or true list. Dan Brown's characters attack the New Testament canon by asserting that the canon was cobbled together very late – under the nefarious political influence of the Roman Emperor Constantine at the Nicene Council in the fourth century. Brown claims that the heretical Gnostic Gospels were earlier, or at least more authentic than the four traditional Gospels, so that the Gnostic writings uncovered at Nag Hammadi in 1945 must be added into the New Testament canon. Of course these writings were by heretics who denied the New Testament witness to who Jesus Christ really was as God and man, in two natures and one Person.

Thus, if these much later and heretical writings are elevated to divinely authoritative, then they would immediately cancel out the apostolic testimony

to our true Lord and Saviour in the original New Testament. These heretical Gnostic writings do indeed allow nature worship, goddess worship, and all kinds of immoral sexuality. That is certainly why there is so much interest in them today in our secularized, anti-Christian culture of the West.

What do the facts of history show about these attempts to deny the original authority of the inspired books of the New Testament by claiming they are late, that they were foisted in by political pressure, and then to replace them functionally by adding in heretical writings of a much later period? Any main-line New Testament scholar could easily spend a semester dealing with each one of these issues. That is not possible for this paper. All I can attempt to do here is to point you in the right direction to follow, if you are interested in pursuing the details. To do so, let me mention only two major issues: (1) the dates of the New Testament writings and (2) the dates of the heretical Gnostic writings.

(1) The dates of the New Testament writings

Undoubtedly, scholars do not always agree on some of the particular details, but it is generally accepted by liberal and conservative, by Catholic, Protestant and Eastern Orthodox, that all of the books of the New Testament were written in the first century; probably the last of them, the Apocalypse or Book of Revelation, at least by AD95, although much scholarship now dates it before the destruction of Jerusalem in AD70. Professor John A. T. Robinson, who taught at Cambridge, and was once a notorious liberal, later in his career did significant work indicating that possibly the entire New Testament was indeed composed before AD70. I refer you to his popular books *Redating the New Testament Documents* for the details. Many scholars would not accept all of his argumentation, but all agree that everything was written at least by AD95 or sooner.

Ancient documents from the first and second centuries, which are accepted by all knowledgeable academics, make clear the early nature of the New Testament canonical books. Let me briefly refer to one or two summaries:

'A canon list called the Muratorian Fragment is dated to the latter half of the second century because Marcion is mentioned as a contemporary of the author. With the exception of Hebrews, James, and 1 and 2 Peter, it includes references to all the New Testament books...

'The four Gospels are an interesting case. A Greek manuscript known as P45 and dated around AD200, has all four Gospels together. The Magdalen College Greek Fragments of Matthew's Gospel is an early book that contains only the four Biblical Gospels. One scholar argues that this collection comes from the first half of the second century. Another, basing his arguments on ancient writing forms, dates it as early as the first century...

'A German scholar believes that the titles, "the Gospel according to Mark, to Matthew," and so forth, were added when the Gospels were first completed and circulated together, "between 60 and 100". He reasons that if scribes had added the titles later (in the second or third centuries), there would be no way to explain the surprising fact that in the thousands of Greek manuscripts the Gospels all have the same titles.'¹⁵

This does not prove that the New Testament is true, but it does prove that it is very early; dating to within a few years of the incarnation of Christ on earth; some of its original manuscripts dating to the actual lifetimes of His original apostles. There are over 5,000 of these early manuscripts, and these have been known for almost two millennia, and for the most part they are agreeable within themselves in great detail. In addition to that, many of the Church Fathers in the second and third centuries refer extensively to the canonical writings of the New Testament, hence establishing their existence well

before their time without question. To deny the historicity of this ancient and universally known canon is to fly in the face of all serious scholarship.

This canon was established all across the ancient known world long before the rise of the emperor Constantine, who Brown (through Sir Leigh Teabing) alleges 'commissioned and financed a new Bible... and embellished those gospels that made Him godlike'.¹⁶ No New Testament scholar, whether liberal or conservative, Catholic or Protestant, would accept such a claim; it is false; it is non-scholarship in the extreme. Such a claim is a desperate ploy to evacuate the unwelcome authority of the testimony of the New Testament to Jesus Christ and His divine claims upon all people.

(2) *The Dates of the Heretical Gnostic Writings*

A heretical movement known as 'Gnosticism' tried to replace apostolic Christianity in the second, third and fourth centuries with an amalgamation of pagan philosophy, sexual practices of Greek mystery religions and a religion freed from the constraints of the holiness of God in favor of a sort of what we would call today 'New Age' ideas: especially that each person is god and is free to set their own limits. Gnosticism denied the importance of historical events such as Adam's Fall, the Biblical covenants, the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus, the establishment of the Church and so forth. Rather, they wanted to concentrate on man's own inherent godness with a strange mixture of pagan theories and immoral practices. The Christian Church had to deal with this, or the Gospel would have been lost. And deal with it they did! But these long-ago exploded substitutes for true Christianity are now being trotted out as the latest and liberating secrets, viciously hidden by the power-hungry Church until about 1945 when a library of ancient Gnostic writings was uncovered in Egypt at Nag Hamadi.

Dan Brown and other writers (such as the ultra modernist 'Jesus Seminar' fellows) now wish to replace the New Testament canon with these heretical Gnostic writings, which – with their immoralism – are much more to their liking. But let us look at documented, historical facts. Were these heretical writings earlier – and thus more authentic – than the New Testament? Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* states that these scrolls are 'the earliest Christian records'.¹⁷

But in fact, as Garlow and Jones state: 'The earliest likely date for the Nag Hammadi scrolls is around AD150, and later, when Gnosticism as a system began to flourish'.¹⁸ Dr. Bart Ehrman of the University of North Carolina states that many of the Gnostic gospels 'are dated in the third, fourth and fifth centuries,' and James M. Robinson, editor of *The Nag Hammadi Library* acknowledges the same dates...¹⁹

Documentary evidence does not back the priority of these heretical writings over the New Testament; indeed, the very contrary. Brown and the Jesus Seminar fellows wish to make the Gnostic scrolls authoritative in order to escape the distasteful message of Jesus Christ and the New Testament. They are willing to engage in dishonest scholarship and sheer deception to do so.

But this has been a long enough look at what the heretics – both ancient and modern say about our Lord Jesus Christ, the New Testament scriptures and the apostolic church. Let us turn in the fourth (and last) place to this subject:

IV. What do the Scriptures Say About Jesus Christ?

The Gnostic sympathizers claim that Constantine elevated Jesus to deity for political reasons in the fourth century. But as Olson and Miesel asked: 'If the first followers of Jesus did not believe he was divine, and if they thought that he had not risen again from the dead, why did so many of them willingly die as martyrs?'²⁰

What does Scripture say here as to the identity of Jesus? The holy angel who announces Jesus' coming birth to the Virgin Mary, proclaims that 'thou shalt call his name Jesus for he shall save his people from their sins'. (Matt. 1:21), and that is followed by Gabriel's quotation from Isaiah 7:14: 'Behold a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us' (Matt. 1:23). John 1:1-3 teaches that the Son is as much eternal God as the Father, and that through the agency of this Son who became incarnate in the womb of the Blessed Virgin, all of the worlds were created:

'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made.' John 1:14 speaks of the incarnation of this eternal Word who is the same as God's only begotten Son: 'And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.' Jesus applied to himself the Hebrew name for God – Yahweh or Jehovah ('I am that I am' from Exodus 3: 14 at the burning bush) in John 8: 58: 'before Abraham was I am'. The Pharisees wished to kill him for that claim to co-equal deity with God the Father Almighty. There are over forty passages in the four Gospels where Jesus is called the 'Son of God.' He is ascribed the power to forgive sins; he raises Lazarus from the dead. Romans 1:4 states that he was 'declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead'. 1 Timothy 6: 15-16 speaks of him as 'the Lord Jesus Christ... the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who only hath immortality and dwelleth in light inapproachable...'

In the last book of the Bible, the risen Lord is presented as 'the first and the last' (Rev. 1:17), the very words that

Isaiah 44:6 uses of the Lord God Almighty. It is this Lord Jesus Christ who will be the final judge of the quick and the dead. For as Acts 17:31 tells us: 'Because God hath appointed a day in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance to all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead.'

According to Philippians 2:10-11, the day is surely coming in which 'at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven and things in earth, and things under the earth; and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father'.

All of us – including the people who are denigrating the New Testament and its inspired testimony to the Father's Son – must soon enough stand before the Throne with an assembled universe and give account for whether or not we accepted with our hearts the Father's witness that Jesus Christ is Lord. Romans 10: 9 shows that this is the only way to be saved for an endless eternity: 'That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved.' But to deny him before men now means that He will deny us before the Father on that last momentous day (as the Lord tells us in Luke 12:9).

That is why I have asked you to take the time to study such matters about who Jesus Christ really is, for your own eternal salvation or endless lostness – and that of all whom you shall ever meet - directly depends on how you answer this question. Nothing else could ever matter so much as that. Let us be certain that we come to terms with who He is, while there is still time. Let me conclude in the invitational words of our Lord in Revelation: 'And the Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely. For I tes-

tify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book: If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book. And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book' (Rev. 22: 17-19).

Endnotes

¹ Carl E. Olson and Sandra Miesel, *The Da Vinci Hoax: Exposing the Errors in the Da Vinci Code* (Ignatius Press: San Francisco, 2004).

² Quoted in James L. Garlow and Peter Jones, *Cracking Da Vinci's Code* (Victor: Colorado Springs, 2004), 19.

³ *Ibid.*, 151.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 169.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 223.

⁶ Garlow and Jones, *op. cit.*, 24.

⁷ Olson and Miesel, *op. cit.*, 268.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 269.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 270.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 93.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 94.

¹² *Ibid.*, 236.

¹³ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 238.

¹⁴ Garlow and Jones, *op. cit.*, 219.

¹⁵ Garlow and Jones, *op. cit.*, 143,144.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 147.

¹⁷ Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (Anchor Books: New York, 2003), 245.

¹⁸ Garlow and Jones, *op. cit.*, 163.

¹⁹ Quoted in Olson and Miesel, *op. cit.*, 64.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 69.

Ministry in the New Global Culture of Major City-Centers

Tim Keller, Senior Pastor, Redeemer Presbyterian Church

Part I of a series

©Copyright Timothy Keller, 2005. Use by permission only.

I. WORLD CITY-CENTERS ARE GROWING IN POWER AND CONNECTEDNESS

A. Globalization is making major world cities more powerful than ever. Why?

- 1) The mobility of capital means national governments are now virtually powerless to control the flow of money in and out of their own economies, thus greatly decreasing their influence in general. The cities are the seats of multi-national corporations and international economic, social, and technological networks.
- 2) The technology/communication revolution means that national governments are powerless also to control what their people watch or learn. As a result, it is the culture/values set of world-class cities that is now being transmitted around the globe to every tongue, tribe,

people, and nation. NY and LA are now far more influential in forming the culture of, say, teenagers in rural Indiana or rural Mexico than are the national or local governments or civic institutions. Sum: This is the first overall major erosion of nation-state power in 800 years.

- N. Pierce: 'Great metropolitan regions... not nation-states – are starting to emerge as the world's most influential players.' Cities are growing in the 'Third World' at an enormous rate and are regenerating in the US and Europe. In the US even smaller cities have seen a renaissance of their downtown cores, as professionals, immigrants, international business leaders, empty-nest baby-boomers, artists, and the 'young and hip' move back in. The coming world 'order' will be a global, multi-cultural, and urban order.

B. Globalization is making world-cities even more connected and thus alike.

- Globalization means, secondly, that the largest cities in each country are becoming more alike and connected to one another than they are to the rest of their own countries. This is particularly true of the world *city-centers*.

What are 'city-centers'? The center city, unlike the 'inner city' (where the poor live) or where the working-class live, is where there is a confluence of
a) residences for professionals,
b) major work and job centers, and
c) major cultural institutions – all in close proximity.

Who lives in the 'city-centers'?
a) Young single corporate professionals and

- b) young creative professionals (the hip and artistic) – both trying to ‘make it’;
- c) corporate leaders who ‘make it’ into wealth and
- d) creative leaders (of the arts and the academy) – who create alliances to run the major cultural institutions of society;
- e) new Immigrant families (who work and live near the city-centers – e.g. ‘Chinatowns’) and their
- f) 2nd-generation children seeking professional success;
- g) large numbers of students and academics, and
- h) the gay community.
- The cultures of center-cities in different hemispheres are surprisingly similar. There are many daily connections and their residents travel and move back and forth between them. So ministry leaders from other cities in the world come to Redeemer in NYC and say: ‘We admire many US churches but they are in places that are unlike our own country and culture. But NYC is very much like the largest cities in our own country – so we think much that ‘works’ there will probably work here.’

II. GLOBAL CITY-CENTER CULTURE IS COMPLEX

So globalized city-centers are the strategic ‘leading edge’ of world culture. So what are they like? Would we say that young city-center dwellers are ‘post-moderns’? That analysis is too simplistic.

A. *The limitations of the modern vs. post-modern categories of analysis.*

- There is almost a consensus among suburban Anglo evangelicals that Baby boomers are more ‘modern’ but the younger generations are ‘post-modern’, and so ministry will need to change radically to reach the ‘emerging’ culture. Some of the polarities:

- Moderns are rational/cognitive; post-moderns are more experiential and intuitive.
- Moderns are secular, anti-spiritual; post-moderns are more open to the spiritual, mystical.
- Moderns are more ‘hard’ liberal or ‘hard’ conservative; post-moderns are less ideological.
- Moderns are individualistic; post-moderns are more oriented to community and friendship.
- These generalizations are largely true among Anglos, who went through a period in which our culture almost worshipped science and rationality and the absolute freedom of the individual over family and community. Now among some Anglos, there is a strong reaction against ‘modernity’. There is a strong reaction to the very idea of ‘objective truth’ so the emphasis is on experience rather than information, narrative rather than propositions, dialogue rather than proclamation, process rather than settled positions. Anglo evangelicals seeking to create an ‘emerging church’ have called for ‘non-foundationalist’ theology that incorporates post-modern insights.
- But African-Americans, Latinos, and Asians didn’t get such a strong dose of the Enlightenment even here in the US; and the people of Africa, Latin America, and Asia certainly did not either. The post-modern allergy to setting boundaries, to fixed doctrine, to persuasion-evangelism, to objective truth does not resonate very well with them. They are not as much in reaction to ‘modernity’ since they never were as rationalistic and individualistic as US-Europeans had become.
- Additionally, post-modernism in academic circles is now seen as a spent force. For example:
 - The European thinkers who developed ‘deconstruction’ in the 70s and 80s are seen as passé.
- At the University of Chicago in 1997 a major conference was held called ‘After Post-modernism’. It posed the question: *If we absorb postmodernism... but do not want to stop in arbitrariness, relativism, or aphoria*, what comes after postmodernism?
- Terry Eagleton recently wrote *After Theory* (2004) saying that we have to realize again that there are moral absolutes. Emily Eakin wrote an article for the *New York Times* ‘The Latest Theory is that Theory Doesn’t Matter’ (April 19, 2003) covering a high level gathering in US academia reported the consensus that post-modern theory was dead, largely because it didn’t give anyone the basis for calling oppression and injustice *wrong*.
- As a result there are many efforts (probably too inchoate to be called a ‘movement’ as yet) seeking to get beyond the modern idolization of individual consciousness (in which the individual defines truth for him or her-self) and the post-modern idolization of community (in which the community defines the grammar of truth and there is no way to know if it has any correspondence to reality.) N. T. Wright refers to ‘naïve realism’ of pre-modern times, the ‘positivist realism’ of modernism, the ‘anti-realism’ of post-modernity, and the ‘critical realism’ which is now emerging. This is a view that we can know truth, though only partially and after a great deal of humble critical reflection. (*The New Testament and the People of God*, p.32ff.)
- Paul Vitz has termed this new way ‘Trans-modern’ (‘The Future of the University: From Post-modern to Transmodern’ in *Rethinking the Future of the University* ed. D. L. Jeffrey.) There is music, art, literature, and architecture trying to move

'beyond' both modern rationalism and the post-modern allergy to reason and love of fragmentation. (See J. Parker 'A Requiem for Postmodernism – Whither Now?' in *Reclaiming the Center* Crossway, 2004.)

- The cultural reality in city-centers is that *all* the 'world-views' – traditional, modern, post-modern, and post-post-modern exist in significant strength. We should not imagine that 'post-modernism' is a juggernaut that will take over. Global city-centers are complex 'salad bowls' of them all. Effective ministry must recognize that and not simplistically aim to only reach 'post-moderns' which will only be a slice of city-centers.
 - The traditional world-view will be especially present with first-generation immigrants who have made it professionally in the city-center and come to city-center churches.
 - The modern world-view will be especially present with Anglos, with middle aged people, and with those working more in business and science.
 - The post-modern world-view will be especially present with younger Anglos, and those in the arts (80% of which are Anglo).
 - The post-post-modern world-view is seen in younger non-Anglos and in today's teenagers.

B. Comparing three city-center 'world-views' and a fourth.

- 1. TRADITIONALIST – People from US South and Midwest, rural/small towns. Blue-collar people in general, non-Anglo 1st generation immigrants from non-Western countries, and people 70 or older.
- Identity – Duty accepted. Your social obligations define you. Your conscience is the 'real you' more than feelings or reason.

You have a duty to your people and family, and you find meaning and significance in fulfilling that. There is little talk of 'finding yourself' but rather of fulfilling your role in the tribe/people.

- Meaning of life – To be good.
- Major cultural 'felt need' –

How can I get the strength to be a good person? How can I overcome the feelings of guilt over ways I have failed? Much more concern for traditional values.

- Value – Give me the right thing to do – and I will do it.
- Relationships – The most important relationships are people you are born into relationship with – family, clan, and long-time neighbors. The primary relationship is a family one. You love them by being totally loyal or faithful to them. 'Storge'-based love.
- Persuasion – Concrete thinkers. Show me how this produces good character, I'll believe it.
- Idols –

- 1) Authority. Prone to blind duty.
- 2) Racism. Prone to make an idol out of your people or 'blood' (fascism).
- 3) Moralism. A very overt belief you save yourself by being good.

- Ministry contextualization

- 1) Contextualizing the gospel to traditional people (see 'cultural felt need') –
 - a) You know you should be good, but you aren't (sin as falling short of the glory of God)
 - b) only in Jesus can you be both forgiven and made righteous (grace as propitiation of wrath).
- 2) Dangers of over-contextualization to traditional people:
 - a) The gospel becomes only a way to get your individual personal sins/failings covered so you can go to heaven.
 - b) Preaching becomes exclusively doctrinal and legalistic.

c) Leadership becomes authoritarian. Pastors wield enormous personal power.

d) Tone becomes harsh and condemning toward outsiders.

e) Often too heavily rooted in the past. Some former historical Christian era is seen as 'golden'.

3) Key way to challenge traditional people – the gospel of grace. Religion is as much a form of self-salvation as immorality and irreligion. Sin is self-salvation, not just breaking the rules. Explain 'elder-brother lostness' not only 'younger brother lostness' from Luke 15. If anything, religion is a greater barrier to real conversion and life-change than is irreligion.

2. MODERN – People from US Northeast and West coast, suburbs and exurbs. College educated over 45, those in corporate rather than the creative professions, Anglo. 'Boomers' and 'Bobos'.

- Identity – *Desire discovered*. Your deepest passions and desires define you. Your feelings are more the real 'you' than your duties or even your thinking. You have a duty to discover your deepest feelings and dreams and you find meaning and significance in fulfilling that. The rights, freedom, and fulfillment of the individual are far more important than the needs of a group or family or community.
- Meaning of life – To be free (and therefore happy).
- Major 'felt need' – How can I be free? How can I be set free to find my truest self and pursue my greatest passions? Much more concern for individual human rights and freedom.
- Value – Give me what I need to fulfill my personal goals and vision.
- Relationships – The most important relationships are those with people who help you get to your personal goals, who give you good feelings and emotions. The primary relationship is a sexual one.

You love them by freeing them to be themselves. 'Eros'-based love.

- **Persuasion** – Rational thinkers. If you can prove it to me, give me enough reasons, I'll believe it. They are not at all open to the idea of the supernatural or miracles, and they tend to see religion of any kind to be primitive and a barrier to scientific and social progress.
- **Idols** –
 - 1) **Feelings.** If I feel it I must not go against it. I can't help them.
 - 2) **Individualism.** I decide what is right or wrong for me.
 - 3) **Science and reason.** By them we can control the environment and make a world that fulfills my desires.
 - 4) **Implicit moralism** that I save myself by achieving.
- **Ministry contextualization**
 - 1) Contextualizing the gospel for moderns (see 'cultural felt need').
 a) You know you should be free but you aren't (sin as building your identity on idols rather than God).
 b) Only in Jesus will you have a Lord that does not enslave and who became a ransom to buy you out of slavery (grace as liberation from bondage-personal 'powers').
 - 2) **Dangers of over-contextualization to moderns:**
 a) The gospel becomes *only* a way to get personal fulfillment here and now, get your needs met, solve your personal problems.
 b) Preaching becomes exclusively practical 'how-to' sermons on living.
 c) Leadership adopts a business-model. Pastors are more CEOs than shepherds.
 d) Individualistic (with little emphasis on working for the common good) and moralistic (blessing happens through your efforts to 'apply Biblical principles').
 e) Almost no rootedness in the past at all. Distinctives of historic tradition (Anglican, Reformed, Lutheran, Orthodox, Wesleyan, etc.) are played way down or dropped altogether.
- 3) **Key way to challenge moderns** – the gospel of the *kingdom*. Show how secular people are just as 'religious' (through idolatry) and ultimately just as enslaved and self-saving as the moralistic religious people you despise. Call to forsake old masters/lords and come into a new administration/kingdom based on service. Show how it is belief in the gospel (not just trying harder) that is the solution to every problem.
- **POST-MODERN** – People from US Northeast and West, especially urban areas. College-educated 25-45 mainly Anglo. Sometimes called 'cultural creatives' (Paul H. Ray) or 'creative class' (R. Florida).
- **Identity** – *Created and unstable.* There is no 'true' identity to be either accepted or discovered. There is no core 'essence' to which to be true – either moral or psychological. (See Kenneth Gergen.) One's identity is pieced together and is constantly changing. There is little or no talk of 'finding yourself' but rather 'creating' yourself.
- **Meaning of life** – You have to find your own way on that. There is no over-arching purpose. Much less emphasis on 'vision', much less confidence that we know what is best for the world or others or ourselves. We 'see through' so many 'visions' for the world as having been just power plays.
- **Major cultural 'felt need'** – How can such totally different/diverse people live together in peace? How can community be built in a deeply pluralistic world? Much more concern for social justice.
- **Value** – Give me something that moves me (because so little does!)
- **Relationships** – The most important relationships are the people you are committed to. (Reaction vs. the discardable selfish relationships of modernists.) The primary relationship is friendship. You love them by not judging them. 'Philos'-based love. In general, a deep hunger for community.
- **Persuasion** – Pragmatists. Show me that this works – and builds community, and I'll believe it. They are not as rational or as linear in their thinking and are much more open to story and mystery. They are not as skeptical of the supernatural or of spirituality, but they see the church as a key wielder historically of oppressive power.
- **Idols** –
 - 1) **Inclusion.** An unwillingness to ever confront or take a stand for truth. No one can ever be made to feel like an outsider.
 - 2) **Doubt/cynicism.** An extremely deep belief (!) that virtually everyone is out to exploit you. An unwillingness to commit to any idea or truth or cause – just friends.
 - 3) **Group identity.** My community defines reality—no one from outside can evaluate or judge it.
 - 4) **Implicit moralism.** Cynicism is ultimately pride that you are the only one not 'phony'.
- **Ministry contextualization**
 - 1) Contextualizing the gospel for post-moderns (see cultural 'felt need'):
 - a) You know you should love and embrace 'the Other' who is deeply different from you but you can't help but feel superior (sin as exclusion).
 - b) Christianity is the only faith which has at its heart a man dying for his enemies, giving up power, becoming a servant, forgiving them rather than destroying them (grace as the great reversal of value).
 - 2) **Dangers of over-contextualization to post-modern:**
 - a) The gospel becomes only a way to join a kingdom-movement bringing peace and justice to the world. Thus a new form of moralism ('commit to peace and justice and you'll be saved').
 - b) Preaching becomes only story-telling rather than exposition of truth.

c) The leadership model can become so relational that churches must stay extremely small and disorganized.

d) While there is a hunger for ancient tradition, there's a danger of not inhabiting any particular historic tradition (Anglican, Reformed, Lutheran, Orthodox, Wesleyan, etc) and instead just take the trappings of tradition (Celtic crosses, discussions of *lectio divina*, candles, etc) to create a superficial pastiche.

e) Non-judgmentalism is an idol (we can't offend anyone) and thus a new exclusivism.

3) Key way to challenge post-moderns – the gospel of the *cross*. The cross is *not* pragmatic – it doesn't 'work' for you! Belief in Christ means admitting there is truth – but the only kind of truth that won't oppress you. When give up power to the one who gave up power for you – it is the only non-exploitative relationship. Even living for your own ego will exploit you.

4. TRANS-MODERN – Non-Anglo children of immigrants; Age under 25.

- I am not at all sure that the post-post-modern world-view will be called this! A Google search shows that many people are using this as a synonym for post-modern. But some post-po-mo is surely coming for the reasons I mentioned above.
 - a) In the academy po-mo is seen as basically an unstable compound and more a negative – a recognition of the limitations of modernity – than a positive.
 - b) Non-Anglos and those outside Europe and North America didn't go through the 'Enlightenment', used the modern world more critically, and so won't ever become as allergic to reason and the idea of objective truth as 'post-moderns' are.
 - c) We can already see some signs among non-Anglo youth and even Anglo youth that the extreme cynicism and fear of authority and

relativism of post-modern culture is on the wane. (See Christian Smith's new book *Soul Searching* on the religious patterns of US teenagers. He calls it 'Moralistic Therapeutic Deism'.) Teens are less likely to have sex, abortions, out-of-wedlock births than people now in their 20s.

- I think the 'trans-modern' (or whatever it will be) will reject both
 - a) the skepticism of modernity (that does not believe anything unless it is empirically proven) and
 - b) the subjectivism of post-modernity (that does not believe there is any way to know that one belief is truer than any other belief).
 Will this be a neo-traditionalism? Will it be a compromise between modern and post-modern? Only time will tell if these are even the right questions.

© Copyright Timothy Keller, 2005. Use by permission only.

Preaching Apocalyptic Literature

Bob Fyall

Apocalyptic writings in Scripture have, on the whole, had a bad press in recent years. Novels like those by Tim LaHaye have, for example, sensationalised the events around the Second Coming, as have books of popular theology like Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth*; and, if any of you explore second hand bookshops, you may have come across the novels of Sydney Watson who, in an earlier generation, wrote the kind of novels that Tim LaHaye writes nowadays.

What I want to emphasise today is two things:

1. Apocalyptic literature is part of the whole Bible. It's not a separate continent (if you like) but is part of the whole Bible; but
2. It's got certain conventions, certain ways of presenting the gospel, which are in some ways different from other genres in the Bible.

We need to preach on apocalyptic literature because there is a lot of it in the Bible

There is Daniel, Zechariah, Revelation – these are probably the main examples in Scripture of apocalyptic books. But we do also have the so-called 'Olivet

Discourse': these are the words of our Lord on the Mount of Olives, and are sometimes called the 'little apocalypse', spoken just before the events of the Passion and the Resurrection (Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21). There are also elements of apocalyptic writing in both the letters to the Thessalonians, especially at the end of 1 Thessalonians and in the second chapter of 2 Thessalonians; and in 2 Peter, especially chapter 3.

So that is the first thing: we need to engage with it and there is an awful lot to engage with, and we will miss a great deal of Scripture if we ignore apocalyptic literature.

Apocalyptic literature is different in some respects from other parts of the Bible

This forces us to ask the question, 'What is apocalyptic literature?'

And one thing I want to make clear is this: I don't believe there is as rigid a division between prophecy and apocalyptic literature as many commentators believe. There have been many attempts to say that you have prophecy and then you have

apocalyptic literature, which is later and to some people's minds inferior.

However, in my view apocalyptic literature is a particular type of prophecy, and is, actually, a particular emphasis you get in all the prophetic books – especially in the books I have mentioned. But there are some distinct characteristics of apocalyptic literature:

- (i) Apocalyptic literature tends to deal with symbolism. For example, numbers, especially 10, 7, 3, 4 and the notorious number 666 in the book of Revelation.¹
- (ii) Apocalyptic literature particularly emphasises the unseen world, but the unseen world is there throughout Scripture. And what is particularly emphasised in the apocalyptic literature is the heavenly throne room. Daniel has the picture of the heavenly throne room and the Son of Man coming with the clouds of Heaven. Revelation has the picture of the heavenly throne room in chapters 4 and 5 and so on. But you will also remember back in the earlier prophets, in Isaiah chapter 6, for example, we have the same vision in the call of Isaiah – the heavenly throne room.

(iii) Apocalyptic literature uses vivid language – a lot of it is poetry, a lot of it is highly coloured prose.

So by way of summarising these introductory remarks, let me remind you that apocalyptic literature is, first, part of the whole canon of Scripture – it's not an eccentric inhabitant of the biblical world, it's an integral part of it. Second, there are certain conventions we have got to understand and take on board if we are going to take it seriously.

So I want to suggest five principles which I hope will help us get a lot out of apocalyptic literature and help us to preach it and teach it.

I. Fit Apocalyptic Literature into the Big Picture of the Bible

In one sense this is all I am going to say (the other four points are just a development of this). But this is a hugely important thing. We must see apocalyptic literature in its context in the whole of Scripture.

Now that applies to any biblical text – it applies to teaching John or Romans as much as if you are teaching Daniel or Zechariah. But it is especially important for apocalyptic literature. And I want to try to develop this.

The first thing I want to say is that apocalyptic literature concentrates on times of crisis, times of great trauma, times of great stress, and times when the foundations of the faith are being shaken. Now in one sense the whole Bible deals with that. The whole Bible talks about the problems, the difficulties, and the sheer hard graft of the life of faith. However, the interesting thing is this: apocalyptic literature tends to be most popular among persecuted and harassed Christians. It tends to be unpopular among Western, middle-class Christians. And indeed many people have lost their nerve about apocalyptic literature – we feel that it is something that does not speak easily into our world. But I think the post-'9/11' world, the post-'7/7' world, the kind of threatening world we live

God will be God and the world will know it.

in is making apocalyptic literature once again, as it always should have been, tremendously relevant to us. And in particular biblical apocalyptic literature deals with two periods.

(a) Apocalyptic literature is concerned with the exile

The exile, when Israel was taken to Babylon, called into question every aspect of Israel's faith. There was absolutely nothing they believed about God, about themselves and about the world that wasn't questioned. They were back in the first place where Abraham had come from – what C. S. Lewis called 'The Pilgrim's Regress'. Long ago God had called their ancestor, Abraham, to leave Ur of the Chaldeans; but now they are back in the land of the Chaldeans. What's happened to the covenant? God had said that he had made his covenant with his people and he wouldn't withdraw it. What had happened to the Davidic king? What had happened to the covenant with David that one of his descendants will reign for ever on the throne in Zion? What had happened to their whole worship system? They could still worship their God in Babylon, but they didn't have the whole system of priests, of prophets, and of sacrifices to help them. So the exile is a time which calls into question everything about Israel's faith.

Now that means something very important. Since this is such an unprecedented event, God sends massive preparation for it. God sends prophets to prepare them for exile. Isaiah, for example, prophesies in 8th century Jerusalem that the nation will be taken into exile; and he prophesies their return. That's why it is so wrong to split Isaiah into pre- and post-exilic

prophetic messages, because, if you do that, you lose this massively important word of God given to these people before exile to prepare them for it. And if you do the same to Daniel, by claiming this was written in the 2nd century, you are taking away all the comfort, all the encouragement and all the necessary strength that the book is giving.

And in effect what prophets and apocalyptic writers are giving is a whole theology of history. You could put it in this way: God will be God, and the world will know it.

Now God is God at the moment, whether the world knows it or not. But the apocalyptic writers are saying God will be God and the world will know it. Let me read some words from Daniel chapter 4 verses 34b-35:

*His dominion is an eternal dominion;
his kingdom endures from generation to generation.*

*All the peoples of the earth
are regarded as nothing.
He does as he pleases
with the powers of heaven
and the peoples of the earth.
No one can hold back his hand
or say to him: 'What have you done?'*

These are not the words of Daniel, but the words of Nebuchadnezzar. He has been humbled, restored and now comes to make this astonishing confession that this is the God who controls history. And not only controls history, but reveals history to his servants, the prophets – it was what Amos said long before: *Surely the Sovereign LORD does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets.*² These prophetic writers, before the exile, Amos, Isaiah, Micah, Habakkuk, Jonah, others, they are saying that there is going to be a time of disaster, and that is going to be followed by a time of blessing. And the exilic writers, Daniel and Ezekiel in particular, strengthen the people during that time. And, of course, the post-exilic prophets call people back to God and say, 'Look – you are in danger of slipping back into old ways'.

So apocalyptic literature is particularly given to help people during a time of exile, which is a time when God seems to be absent. It's not difficult to see the relevance of that to our own society. We do not look out on a society in which God is acknowledged to be God. And so this is a message we need to proclaim – 'God will be God and the world will know it'.

(b) Apocalyptic literature is concerned with the Last Days

By the Last Days I mean the whole time between the coming of Christ – these are the Last Days according to Scripture. The Last Days began when Christ came into the world. In these last days, Hebrews tells us, God has spoken to us by His Son.³ So if someone comes along and says, 'I've got a message for the Last Days' say, 'Good for you – so do we. Here it is. This is the message for the Last Days. The message of Jesus Christ'.

But the word of God through the prophets and apocalyptic literature particularly concentrates on giving us a word for the Last Days.

The book of Daniel looks to the Last Days

The later chapters of the book of Daniel talk about a period that is still to come in the 2nd century. After Alexander the Great's empire was destroyed and split up into four parts, the King of the North, Antiochus Epiphanes, launched a campaign of hatred against Jerusalem, intending to make Jerusalem desolate. And the apocalyptic writers talk about this three-and-a-half period – they call it '*time, times and half a time*'. That is symbolic language. Antiochus wasn't a great figure in the world stage, but he is hugely important to the apocalyptic writers because he is attacking God's people. And by attacking God's people he is trying to prevent God's purpose. And God's purpose is to bring the Messiah, to bring the one who will destroy the serpent. So Daniel sees this period that is still to come.

This three-and-a-half year period where Antiochus, for example, offers pig's flesh in the Holy of Holies, and sets up a statue of Zeus in the temple and so on. And that is referred to in Daniel (to which Jesus makes reference) '*the abomination which makes desolate*'.⁴ And in the book of Revelation, that phrase '*a time, times and half a time*' applies to the whole period between the coming of Christ. The period when God's work is going on unseen, when Christ has ascended to heaven, but the devil is sending his emissaries, the Beast and the False Prophet – and we will come back to that.

So you can see that Daniel is given a vision which is fulfilled in immediate history and in the Last Days.

So we see the exile and the Last Days as the heart of biblical apocalyptic literature. And so we have got to identify the specific thrust of each of these periods.

The exile prepares the people of God for the Last Days

Daniel is in the exile himself, and so experienced the challenges to Israel's faith first hand. Now the real challenge to Israel's faith was this: God had said, 'build me a temple [and first of all a tent] and I'll live among you'. And in particular Israel was to house the ark of the covenant there. And God promised to meet Israel at the mercy seat. What has happened? The temple is burned and almost certainly the ark was burnt and destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar's armies when they sacked Jerusalem and burned the temple.⁵ So it throws up the question, 'Is God still on the throne? Is he still alive and well?' And so Ezekiel has that tremendous

vision in chapter 1 (which is really an apocalyptic chapter), where he sees the chariot throne of God, and in effect what he sees is a mobile ark of the covenant hovering above Babylon – in other words, the God of Israel is alive and well in Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon.

What's happening? The people are being prepared for a time when the temple no longer needs to be a physical structure, for a time when Jesus turns his back on the temple and says, 'I am the true temple'. That's what John says – 'The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory...'⁶ In other words, the ark of the covenant becomes Jesus the Messiah. And it took the exile to teach people that.

And we need to be teaching that today, don't we? We still have this sentimental attachment to places so often, don't we? And we forget that Jesus died outside the sacred enclosure so everywhere becomes holy ground, as William Cowper says.

The events in Daniel look forward to the time when God will be God, and all the world will know it

So the particular focus of Daniel and Ezekiel is on the Last Days. And let me give you one other example of that. Remember that great chapter in Daniel 3 where Daniel's friends are thrown into the blazing furnace and Nebuchadnezzar sits there gazing into the flames. Those of you who remember coal fires will no doubt recall sitting and looking into the flames imagining you are seeing things. And that is presumably what happened to Nebuchadnezzar. 'Did we not throw three men into the flames?' he asks. You would have thought that Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, king of the world, could have counted. But he says, 'I see four – and the form of the fourth is like that of the son of the gods'. You see what is happening. Without all the paraphernalia of the image, without the bands and banners Nebuchadnezzar had set up, God had taken up his challenge.

So it throws up the question, 'Is God still on the throne? Is He still alive and well?'

Nebuchadnezzar had said, 'Which god is able to rescue you from out of my hand?' and there He is, in the flames, marginalising Nebuchadnezzar. God will be God and the world will know it.

Zechariah looks ahead to the fulfilment in the New Creation

Zechariah (a less well known but a very important book) preaches after the exile when God's promises don't seem to have been fulfilled. This is the same period as the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, and the prophecies of Haggai and Malachi. If you read these you will see the kind of things that were happening – and it is all very downbeat, and very low key; and questions are asked such as, 'Where is the desert blossoming like the rose? Where are the nations who are coming to Zion to worship the King of kings?' And Zechariah says, 'Look! This is happening – God is going to make it happen, and there is a Day coming when it will happen'. And in his later visions he talks about the streets of the city full of old people and children playing. Now when people returned from exile they were mainly the young and the fit. People with children wouldn't travel. Old people would stay in Babylon. Zechariah is looking forward to a time when all God's people will be together. Not that some will be young and some will be old in that sense, but that the whole of God's people will be gathered in the city and children will play in the streets. When do children play in the streets? When the streets are safe. He is pointing forward to this glorious future and to the Day when the Lord will be the one God and He will be acknowledged.

The Olivet Discourse brings together two horizons: the destruction of the temple and the second coming of Christ

And then in the so-called 'Olivet discourse' Jesus is bringing together two horizons – the near horizon (the fall of Jerusalem in AD70) and

the far horizon (His coming again), which the fall of Jerusalem prefigures.

So fit apocalyptic literature into the big picture. See that this is an important stream running through the whole Bible. The stream that shows that God who made the world, is the God who is going to remake it.

Remember in one sense the whole Bible is eschatological. Everything points forward. You could say that the Bible falls into two parts. I don't mean the Old and New Testaments. I mean Genesis 1:1 and the rest. In the beginning God created the Heavens and the Earth. And in a sense everything else is a development and unfolding of that. Did He get it wrong? Did He do a bad job? And the answer is 'no' because One Day He is going to make a new heaven and a new earth which will not only be as good as the one that was made but will far surpass it.

2. Deal with apocalyptic literature faithfully and imaginatively

A lot of apocalyptic literature is poetry. I love poetry; I used to be an English teacher and I really love poetry. However, not everybody loves poetry, but if you are going to preach apocalyptic literature, you are going to have to learn to start loving poetry. You have to 'sing' these words not just read them intellectually.

And when I say that we have to deal with apocalyptic literature imaginatively and faithfully, obviously the faithfully refers to being faithful to Scripture; but on the other hand we have got to realise that if Scripture speaks to us in the language of poetry, it is inviting our imaginations and personalities to be involved, not just our intellect.

God is at work in the whole of history, the whole of time.

Let's look at a few points which flow from this.

(i) Numbers

Numbers in apocalyptic literature aren't just randomly chosen.

The number that is so important in apocalyptic literature is the number 7. There are seven churches in Asia. There are seven spirits before the throne of God. And so on. And that ultimately comes from the seven days of creation. In other words, apocalyptic literature is linked to the creation story and the new creation as I have said already. God is at work in the whole of history, the whole of time.

The seven churches represent the whole church between the comings – not a chronological sequence, that as the church starts she is Ephesus-like and she continues throughout history until she arrives at a Laodicea-like state, but that it represents the church throughout the ages, and so at any one time we can find examples of one or all of them. And they warn us of the dangers and open our eyes to the opportunities. The danger, first of all, of becoming loveless and hard. The danger, second, of heresy, of wrong teaching. The danger, third, of wrong living. But also the opportunities, the gospel opportunities – 'See I have placed before you an open door' says the Lord to the church in Philadelphia, for example. The opportunity to be faithful, and so on.

And '4' seems to me to come from the rivers of Eden. Four rivers ran out of Eden to water the garden. And four in apocalyptic literature means the earth as a whole. The four beasts, which we shall come to in a moment, which rise out of the sea in Daniel 7 represent not just four specific kingdoms but the whole of human power throughout history and geography.

So these are some of the symbolic numbers.

(ii) Imagery emphasises the material nature of the people and the events.

For example, the four beasts in Daniel 7 are very real creatures. They are not simply shadowy figures; they represent, in the first instance, Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome. But they also represent power throughout the world and throughout the ages. They represent human power which is very real.

And notice that they come out of the great sea. And the great sea, first of all, is the Mediterranean. When the Old Testament talks about 'the great sea' it means the Mediterranean. When the Old Testament talks about 'the great river' it means the Euphrates. And so when it talks about the land from the great sea to the great river that is the limit of their geographical horizons at that time, and it means the whole earth.

In Revelation 13 we see two beasts arise out of the sea, and these along with the dragon, represent the unholy trinity. The dragon summons two beasts – one is the beast which rises and dies again (a parody of Christ Himself); and the other beast, the False Prophet, is a parody of the Holy Spirit because he glorifies the first beast.

Now many of our brothers and sisters throughout the world suffer terribly from the first beast. He represents the beast of persecution; the beast of militarism; the beast of totalitarianism.

We particularly suffer in the West from the second beast – the false prophet, false teaching and wrong teaching, which has done so much damage to the church in the last two-and-a-half centuries. And Peter, of course, talks about this in the second chapter of his second letter, as Jude does as well – and both these books have apocalyptic elements.

Ultimately, in other words, these symbols are related to the doctrine of creation. God created a world; that world is also sinful and in Daniel we see this again. At the beginning of Daniel 7 we see the four winds of heaven raging over the great sea. And the four winds there seem to me to be a deliberate echo of Genesis 1 with the Spirit moving in creation. The four

spirits or four winds represent the Holy Spirit and His work of convicting the world of sin, righteousness and judgment. In other words, human power comes into being because of the activity of God, the activity of the Spirit. Paul says this in a more prosaic way in Romans 13:1, '*The authorities that exist have been established by God*'.

But the devil is also at work. The great sea is not just the literal sea, but the abode of evil, the abode of Leviathan, the abode of the evil spirits. It is a picture of God and Satan in a titanic battle throughout human history. And that, of course, takes us right back to Genesis 3: *he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel*.⁸

This titanic struggle is set up between God and the devil. And the imagery of these apocalyptic books is particularly powerful in presenting that.

3. Link the present with the eternal

All preaching must link the present with the eternal. If it doesn't do that, we are just going to talk platitudes. Instead, when we are preaching, we must proclaim great truths. If I want platitudes about the state of affairs or the state of the weather I can take a ride in a taxi or go for a haircut; but that's not what the pulpit is for. The pulpit is there to present great truths which link the present with the eternal; and apocalyptic literature helps us here.

Let me give you two examples.

(i) In Daniel, there are a number of visions, which arise out of the precise historical setting. Daniel spends his entire life in exile – he is probably a teenager when we meet him in chapter 1, and almost certainly in his eighties by the end of the book. And during that time he works in Babylon as a civil servant. And God is speaking to him and showing him the link between the present and the eternal – and we need to do that as well.

(ii) In Revelation 2 and 3 you know that the setting and the cities,

where these churches were, is the source for much of the imagery. The present is linked with the eternal.

In many ways I am making a very obvious and straightforward point. We have to preach eternal truths to the people to whom we are preaching. We have to preach in the real world; but we have got to be in touch with the real unseen world. If we just preach from this seen world, we will only preach platitudes. We will merely give advice. If we simply go off into the spiritual stratosphere and ignore the people in front of us, we'll simply not connect. We need to link the two together. And apocalyptic literature does this.

Apocalyptic literature is practical

And another side to apocalyptic literature is that it is very practical. 2 Peter 3 speaks in an apocalyptic passage of the heavens and earth being burned up, and everything on the earth's surface being laid bare. And

All preaching must link the present with the eternal.

what does Peter then say? Does he say, 'Go therefore and speculate about it.' No, he says nothing of the sort. He says, 'So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him',⁹ because we are waiting for that Day which is coming.

So Daniel, Revelation and 2 Peter speak to real people living in the real world.

And in Daniel 12:1-3 Michael says to Daniel, 'But at that time your people – everyone whose name is found written in the book – will be delivered. Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever'. This is a tremendous

encouragement in gospel work. Those who turn to righteousness will be there when the physical universe is gone.

This is the same in Psalm 102:26

*They will perish, but you remain;
they will all wear out like a garment.
Like clothing you will change them
and they will be discarded.*

In other words, gospel work is going to last into eternity.

And apocalyptic literature is absolutely saturated with that. These guys like Daniel are able to speak into this world because they are in touch with that world. Remember the importance of prayer in Daniel. Daniel opens his windows toward Jerusalem in chapter 6. What does that mean? It can't mean he opens his windows to the literal city, which has not yet been rebuilt – the exile was still going on; no one had returned; there is nothing there. What Daniel is doing is opening his window to the reality of

Gospel work is going to last into eternity.

which Jerusalem speaks – Zion, the City of our God. Remember what the author of Hebrews says: *But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God.¹⁰*

And one final point. Daniel 11 and 12 show us how providence and free will are linked together. In many ways that is the big biblical issue. God plans everything, God works out everything according to the purpose of His will – if He doesn't there can be no prophets and no apocalyptic as there is nothing to reveal. But some deny this, like Clark Pinnock. And if he and others are right in saying that even God does not know certain things are going to happen, how are we going to link that with what we read in Daniel 11? There we see how very detailed predictions are made about events that were still

to happen. And liberals say that if this is correct it means that the characters are puppets – they are robots. It was predestined for them. But if you read the chapter carefully you will find that two themes come up over and over again. The theme of love and marriage is the first one; and the theme of ambition and power is the other. In other words these people were not puppets – at every stage in their lives they were making choices. Love stories and stories about ambition are stories of choices and decisions; stories (again) about real people in the real world.

4. Link apocalyptic literature with other genres in the Bible

This is another way of saying, *'Fit it into the Big Picture'*. But more specifically you must see how apocalyptic literature usually grows out of other types of writing.

Let us look at Revelation, for example. And if you want to preach on Revelation effectively, one of the ways to do it is to see how the book describes itself. And the book describes itself in 3 ways:

- (i) It is an apocalypse, a revelation of Jesus Christ – the unveiling of the Son of Man who comes on the clouds of heaven,¹¹ who opens the scroll, who will be the judge of the living and the dead and will complete God's purposes.
- (ii) It is a prophecy – *'Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy';¹²* in other words, this is the fulfilment of the involvement of God in history.
- (iii) It is a letter.¹³ Remember what we call the letters to the seven churches are really personal notes. Rather like you send a circular (everyone does this at Christmas now) to particular friends, but to particular friends you add particular notes. Remember the whole book of Revelation is a letter, and is to be read by the seven churches. In other words, what is said to Ephesus is also relevant

to Laodicea. And so on. In other words, this is doctrine which the whole church needs throughout the whole of its history. It's not just apocalyptic literature and prophecy; it's a letter – in fact it is as much a letter as the letter to the Romans, so we need its teaching.

The apocalyptic elements in Daniel are linked by the theme of 'What is reality'?

In Daniel 3, Nebuchadnezzar's view of reality is: 'Is this not great Babylon which I have built?' And then the voice from heaven comes and says, 'Nebuchadnezzar – you are proud and you will be humbled'. These are two different views of reality. We have got the reality of Babylon, which is real enough, and the reality of the tree, which is the vision that God gave Nebuchadnezzar. And of course seeing the vision of Nebuchadnezzar's empire under a tree reminds us that it was created by somebody else. Nebuchadnezzar thought that he had created Babylon; he hadn't – it was just a tree that someone else had created and someone else would destroy.

The 'Olivet Discourse' links with the themes of each particular gospel

Let us look, as a final example, at the so-called 'Olivet Discourses'. It is interesting to see how the different gospel writers use it to carry forward the main theme of the gospel.

Matthew, as you know, builds his gospel around a number of blocks of teaching. And in Matthew the Olivet Discourse is linked with parables such as the virgins, the talents and so on which also point forward to the future.

In Mark it is linked with the various confrontations with the religious leaders – remember that the Son of Man is going to come on the clouds of heaven and in the glory of his Father, and so at the end of the confrontation this will reveal who was right and who was wrong.

And Luke particularly focuses on the temple and links it with the story of the widow and the temple treasury. And it is in Luke that Jesus weeps as He leaves the temple, as He turns His back on it.

5. Preach Christ

In a sense this sums up everything else. When we are preaching Daniel and Zechariah we are preaching Christ. So we must preach all this Christologically.

In Daniel 7 the Son of Man comes with the clouds of heaven. In other words, the Son of Man, the Last Adam, comes to remake and renew creation. Remember that Paul develops that in Romans 5 – the last Adam defeats sin and Satan. And then in 1 Corinthians 15 he also develops this: the last Adam brings about the new creation.

Incidentally that helps us understand the phrase that many people misunderstand in 1 Corinthians 15. Remember

Preach the big picture and preach Christ

in 1 Corinthians 15 (which in many ways is an apocalyptic writing, in the way I have defined apocalyptic literature) Paul talks about Christ ruling over everything, subduing everything including death, and then He Himself being subject to the Father. Now that does not mean that the eternal Son of God becomes inferior to the Father, because if that were to happen the gospel simply evaporates. Jesus becomes one with us but he is not one with God. The point is that he is called the Last Adam – and as the representative man hands over to the Father the kingdom which he won by his death and his resurrection. He has opened that kingdom to believers. The new Heavens and the new earth are possible.

So preach Christ. Preach Him from Revelation 4 and 5. He is the Alpha and Omega. Remember the two-

fold song in Revelation: the song of creation ('*You are worthy O Lord... for you have created all things*'¹⁴); and the song of redemption, which has these significant words added: '*To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb.*'¹⁵ The Lamb is worshipped along with the Father. And you get that in Revelation 15 – the redeemed in heaven sing the song of Moses and of the Lamb.¹⁶ This is the whole big picture of the two testaments, Moses and the law, and Christ and the New Creation. They are linked together.

In Revelation 12 and 13, he is the destroyer of Satan. This is the culmination of that battle that began in Genesis 3, and that battle which is still raging. At the First Coming the young Redeemer lands incognito behind enemy lines; He meets the serpent and gives him a death blow; but the serpent is still active; and the final results of that victory are still to be seen.

So in a sense these are the two bookends. Preach the big picture and preach Christ. Because if you preach the big picture then you are preaching Christ. And these others points fit into that.

So let me give you some comments to finish with:

(i) Take eschatology seriously. Apocalyptic literature is not just about the last things; as we are already in the Last Days, it has a message for us today. That's what Paul means in Acts 17 when he says, '*For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.*' Because the resurrection has happened, and because the ascension has happened, the judgment is already in process. It's not as if we live in this world, and then at the end there is the resurrection and the Second Coming. It is, as John said, that eternal life is now. It's here already.

(ii) Look for this pattern of death and resurrection throughout Scripture. In a sense you get this

right from the beginning. Adam and Eve are expelled from the garden of Eden, which is a kind of exile. And then the Lord God announces the gospel, which gives hope for a resurrection. Then there is Israel, having left one exile in Egypt, goes to another – this pattern of death and resurrection.

(iii) Emphasise the unity of the Testaments. Apocalyptic literature brings together the exile and the Last Day, because it concerns the Son of Man, who is both the Last Adam and the Lord from Heaven, both the man from dust and the man from Heaven.

And so apocalyptic literature, in its unique and creative way, is all about Christ, the Son of Man, and His work – to defeat Satan and bring in the New Heavens and New Earth.

Endnotes

¹ In my view, if 7 is the number of perfection, then 666 is the number which almost makes perfection. That is what God writes over humanity – 'not good enough', which seems to be the ultimate significance of 666. All human achievement is not good enough; only God can bring in the new creation.

² Amos 3:7.

³ Hebrews 1:2.

⁴ Daniel 11:31; Mark 13:14.

⁵ Nobody really knows what happened – although Stephen Spielberg thinks he does.

⁶ John 1:14.

⁷ Revelation 3:8.

⁸ Genesis 3:15.

⁹ 2 Peter 3:14.

¹⁰ Hebrews 12:22.

¹¹ Revelation 1:7.

¹² Revelation 1:3.

¹³ Revelation 1:4.

¹⁴ Revelation 4:11.

¹⁵ Revelation 5:13 (emphasis added).

¹⁶ Revelation 15:3.



Ann Allen meets Gordon Kennedy

Gordon Kennedy, currently Minister in Portpatrick linked with Stranraer: St Ninian's, and Chairman of 'Forward Together' wasn't always in the business of gospel preaching. He began adult life as a civil engineer building roads and bridges in Strathclyde region.

Ann: What brought you into ministry, Gordon?

Gordon: I was part of a group in Partick South Church who met around the Bible weekly, and most of us were converted through that shared time. Having been converted and grown through opening up and reading and exploring the Bible, that became what I most wanted to do. I left university and made enquiries about types of ministry but it wasn't until Fiona and I were on holiday at the Keswick Convention that I experienced the real call from God to full-time ministry during the morning missionary service. On returning I made application to the Church of Scotland and became a student at Trinity College in 1989. Keswick was a significant place for us.

Ann: We are in interesting days regarding training for ministry in the Church of Scotland. What

was your experience of training at Trinity?

Gordon: After a pretty dissatisfying first year I learned Hebrew over the summer so that I was equipped for an Honours in Old and New Testament and so got back to studying the Bible again! It was a great opportunity to sit with the text and build foundations in what the Bible actually says. Then I left college with the degree and learned the practical theology of the parish. I do enjoy study and last year completed an M.Th. in Psalms studies.

Ann: Does that mean that study is an important part of your daily routine?

Gordon: Having dug into learning Greek and Hebrew I decided not to let that go but to continue to use the languages in preparation and study, so the M.Th. was a way of keeping me fresh. I felt that having an expertise in using languages would help me grap-

ple with issues biblically and use the Bible in the committee work of Presbytery and Assembly. We need to articulate what Scripture says in the light of the liberal position which is often the only view heard in the courts of the church.

Ann: So right from the start of your ministry, Gordon, were you intent on becoming a player in the courts of the church?

Gordon: I have never understood how you could not be involved, in that ordination vows include our commitment to the work of the central bodies of the government of our church.

Ann: For most people, however, that would mean participation at presbytery level. Your vision was obviously wider than that?

Gordon: What I have always thought our denomination needed was a continuing reformation. The job is not finished. There is no point

in us lamenting the state of the church if we are not prepared to do something about it. I have always been someone who wants to get involved rather than be an onlooker.

Ann: So most folk would feel that exercising ministry in the corner of Stranraer is not exactly strategic for work in 121!

Gordon: I think many of us, Bill Wallace and Angus Morrison and others from rural and far-flung corners are representative of the national nature of the church and emphasise that life exists beyond the central belt.

Ann: You had a ministry in New Cumnock and then moved to Stranraer in 2000. So as well as cutting your pastoral teeth, fairly early on you had involvement with the Church at central level.

Gordon: Yes, within the first year of my ministry I got involved in Presbytery and 121. I became the presbytery representative on National Mission, served on World Mission as well and then was asked to be part of the Church Without Walls Committee (CWW).

Ann: That report, CWW, came five years ago to the General Assembly and yet we hear it talked of as though it is the current issue in the church. As a serving member of the group, what do you think is significant about CWW?

Gordon: Part of me thinks that the congregations who are able to deal with and implement Church Without Walls don't need it because they have people resources and will already be involved in processes which the report merely affirms. The congregations who need to

develop in the areas of the report find it very difficult to do so because they don't have people resources. It is not really a programme, it is about people: it's conversational, relational and absolutely depends on people resources. Generally I think the church is overwhelmed by it. It was too big and there was too much to deal with. It was a post-modern document and the terms used in the text were not clearly defined so people could make what they wanted of it. It allows you to do a whole lot of things by finding a hook to hang on to.

Ann: Do you think on the whole it has been a useful exercise for the church?

Gordon: Yes and No. There are congregations who were thinking about the kind of initiatives that are described in Church Without Walls and they have been encouraged to go ahead, to grow and move forward, and that has been good.

Where I think it less helpful is that at General Assembly level it has been cherry-picked and we have had headlines without substance so that we are being told we have 'done' Church Without Walls but nothing has really changed. It was supposed to turn the church upside down so that the local congregation was the front line of the church, seeing the vision, taking the initiative and looking to the national church centrally for support, rather than being led by the nose by some central plan. What has most disappointed me is that as a result of Church Without Walls we are not doing anything new. We have reshuffled the old Boards and Committees, given them new names and carried on as before. New Language

about networking and relationship abounds but where is the new work?

Ann: Many folk find the reshaping of the church committees has not been particularly constructive nor does it address any of the real problems which the Church of Scotland faces. From your vantage point on the 'inside' what do you think?

Gordon: Now we have smaller Councils but we have given them powers to co-opt members without reference to any criteria. We have therefore lost control over who has a seat at the table. I am not persuaded that we have got it right and I am not persuaded that the local church is the top priority.

Ann: Gordon, how do you balance all your input centrally with the load of preaching and pastoral work which a busy parish involves?

Gordon: Since the CWW I have only been involved with Nominations so the workload has been very small. I found myself with time previously given to CWW to devote for instance to issues like 'Forward Together'.

Ann: Tell me how you became involved in the relaunching of 'Forward Together'.

Gordon: The CWW group 1999-2001 looked for a representative evangelical group within the church who would receive and respond to papers and contribute to the debate from an evangelical standpoint. The church at that time I think still was moving into a consultation mode and looking for partners to discuss with. The need was obvious. Harry Reid's book, *Outside Verdict*, was enormously influential and chal-

lenged us to bring confidence and clarity to our gospel message, and it seemed to me that evangelicals are the group to do that. He also raised the spectre of division in the church which I think we need to make every attempt to avoid, and so in response to all these I engaged with 'Forward Together' and after a gestation period of two-and-a-half years we relaunched 'Forward Together' in 2005.

Ann: What would be some of your hopes and aspirations for the role of 'Forward Together'?

Gordon: 'The Together' is important and we need to establish and forge an effective unity amongst evangelicals because we do have a tendency to fragment, which is shameful. The reformation of the Church in Scotland is worth working for, and I believe with all my heart that Scotland is redeemable.

Ann: I have talked with a lot of evangelicals within our denomination who would disagree with that statement. Some think the Church of Scotland is not worth saving and doubt that Scotland is redeemable! So what has given you that perspective, Gordon?

Gordon: I think we are still recovering from the effects of the Disruption of 1843 when one-third of the ministers left the Kirk. In the last 50–60 years we have seen a growth in evangelical ministries and seen a rise in numbers of evangelical people in many congregations across Scotland. I hear of many congregations where people are being converted and so the signs are that God is not finished with us yet. I have thought for a long time that we are heading into crisis as a denomination. If in the not-too-distant future the cen-

tral structures of the Kirk implode then I would want us as evangelicals to be well placed to pick up the fragments and build on that, but if we have never engaged and never participated then we are part of the problem not part of the solution.

Ann: Is collapse inevitable?

Gordon: I think, on balance, there is bound to be some sort of catastrophic crisis. A huge number of our congregations are not self-supporting. 57% of all congregational income goes to 121 and we cannot carry on with that kind of burden. But the real question is 'What then?' What do we want the national church to do and how do we want frontline congregations to be supported? Answer that question and you can then design a General Assembly and administrative structure that will effectively support local ministry and mission.

'Forward Together' exists to offer a forum where matters of concern can be debated and thrashed out from a biblical perspective so that there can be some consensus on the issues we confront in the denomination. Finance is a huge factor. I would like to see a realignment in the national budget of the church.

This year for the first time the General Assembly agreed there would be no increase in the budget. I'd like to see the contribution from congregations being reduced from 57% to 40%. That reduction would reshape the central church! Every congregation would be required to show what they are doing in mission with that added 17% and that would mobilise congregations to get out there into their parishes and seek help and resources to grow. Partnerships between con-

gregations would be immensely helpful in people resourcing.

Ann: All this indicates that you have a real passion for contributing to the church at national level. Do you have a similar passion for your people and the parish? Some would say it's impossible to do both!

Gordon: The kind of balance I look to achieve is to spend 10% of my working time on issues outside of the parish and 90% of my time on the people I'm called to serve. That kind of work plan was one of the threads discussed in CWW. Where I think involvement outside of parish helps ministry is the regular contact with others in joint tasks. Parish ministry can be very isolating and contact with fellow evangelicals can be sporadic. Involvement in the bigger picture gives real opportunity for fellowship, cross-fertilisation and for getting a proper perspective on problems as they occur in ministry. Local ministry for me is the beginning and end of church. Worship, preaching, living out faith together in community: these are the essentials of gospel ministry. If I ever felt that my engagement outside the parish adversely affected my ministry then I would pull back and I have asked wise friends to keep an eye on that balance.

Ann: Gordon, you live one-and-a-half hour's drive from the nearest large town. In an age of depleted church resources should we still be seeking as the national church to have a presence in every part of Scotland?

Gordon: The plan to have a church in every parish is a mission strategy for our national church. Now it is a

strategy which is two to three hundred years old but it still is a mission strategy. The call is to evangelise and worship throughout every part of Scotland. It could be time to review that strategy and to see how best we deploy our resources. I would like to see small and scattered communities raising up their own leaders and training them for service. There is a widening cultural gap between rural and urban Scotland. Community is natural in rural situations and the church needs to be fully integrated there.

I don't want to end up in rural Scotland trooping round a huge group of churches exercising sacramental ministry because everyone else in the ministry team is not permitted to do that, so we need to rethink how we exercise sacramental ministry across large areas. Sometimes the only way we can build up faith is to stop what we are doing and re-establish the work of the gospel in a different way. We are too afraid of pruning and breaking traditions which clearly no longer work. We need to withdraw to regroup so that we can re-establish the frontline of the church's witness.

Ann: With your insider knowledge of church, Gordon, what do you see as the make or break issues facing us as a denomination?

Gordon: The primary underlying issue is the relationship of the church to Scripture. Do we submit to Scripture, continually asking what God is saying to us from his Word, or do we sit in judgement on Scripture, sifting it through the lens of contemporary culture to see which parts of Scripture are acceptable? That for me is the fundamental issue underpinning all the peripheral outcomes. If

there is one area where evangelicals should be well placed to engage in the life of the church it is in an appropriate response to Scripture: humble, obedient, reverent and demonstrated in our pastoral ministry, in preaching, and in debate at regional and national level. Then when controversial issues come up, whether that is stem cell research or the uniqueness of Christ or human sexuality, because we are known as Bible people it is natural for us to present a biblical response to these issues, and people see that there is a fully integrated pattern of biblical thinking and living. 'Forward Together' exists to promote and support people with that kind of vision.

People need to see we live fully integrated lives and that the Bible informs all of our lives and our preaching, and is not just used when it suits us. Integrity is hugely important. We need to be who we say we are all the way through, or we are nothing.

Ann: At this year's General Assembly the fruit of Gordon's work and witness was obvious. He boldly and graciously presented a biblical perspective in crucial debates. The work he had done through 'Forward Together', along with others, resulted in evangelicals, for perhaps the first time, speaking with one voice, supporting one another, and having a clarity in debate which was admirable. There is much to encourage. Given the quality of many of those in ministry in Gordon's generation, who knows what God will yet do in Scotland. 'Forward Together' is a flagship that we should pray for and support, and rejoice that its first captain has such a steady and thoughtful hold on the tiller.

Sexuality and Salvation

Steve Mallon

Scottish Christian Press, Edinburgh, 2004. 114 pp. £8.99

ISBN 190432505X

Please note that this review, which appeared in Issue 13.1 on page 36, was credited to Gordon Palmer, East Kilbride, whereas, in fact, it was done by Karen Palmer, East Kilbride. We apologise to Karen Palmer for this error.

Let's Study Ephesians

Sinclair B. Ferguson

Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 2005. xvi+208 pp. £7.25

ISBN 0851519075

Any new book by Sinclair Ferguson is to be welcomed. This, his third in this Banner of Truth series of which he is the editor, is succinct, practical and essentially pastoral and contemporary in its application of biblical truth. It provides a first-rate exposition for the Christian who is not used to Bible commentaries, as well as for the pastor/teacher of a church fellowship. Although not a verse-by-verse commentary, the reader seldom, if ever, lacks an explanation of an important truth or possible difficulty in understanding without finding it dealt with in the text, as, for example, the meaning of the sealing of the Spirit in chapter 1. Ephesians is never viewed in isolation from the rest of Scripture and its truths are carefully set within the context of the whole. For example, the privileges and blessings Gentile Christians enjoy in Christ are excitingly shown to be the fulfilment of all the covenant blessings God promised in the Old Testament. Helpful insights and emphases abound. Without overwhelming the reader with grammar, the commentary shows how the first part of the letter uses verbs almost exclusively in the indicative mood, thus emphasising what God has already done for us in Christ, whereas the second half is brimfull of impera-

tives, showing that everything we do is dependent upon what God has already done. In dealing with the hope to which we are called, the telling comment is made that 'the purpose behind God's revelation about the future is to transform the way we live in the present'. Particularly helpful are explanations of what it means to be filled with the Spirit, and what Paul writes in Ephesians 1:23 when he declares that our Lord Jesus Christ 'fills all in all'. With its thirty-eight short chapters the book is ideal for personal daily Bible readings in Ephesians. A section at the end of the book divides the material into thirteen sections, suitable for church home Bible study groups, and questions for study and discussion are provided. Chapters 30 and 31 would be excellent for use in marriage preparation classes. I found the book full of helpful illustrations, invaluable to the reader and to the preacher, as, for example, what is said about the Old Testament: 'The revelation of the Old Testament functioned like scaffolding. It was temporary. But it took its shape from what God planned in eternity and was building behind the scaffolding of Old Testament history – the coming of Christ. When Christ came the scaffolding had fulfilled its purpose. It has now been dismantled. Now the *mystery* behind the scaffolding stands revealed. We now understand why the scaffolding was shaped as it was. It was Christ-shaped. His coming has been God's purpose all along.' The book whetted my appetite to preach again from Ephesians and it prompted me literally to want to bow the knee in worship in response to what Ephesians explains about God's grace given to us in the Lord Jesus (Eph. 3:14).

Derek Prime, Edinburgh

Book Reviews

New Testament Theology: Communion and Community

Philip F. Esler

SPCK, London, 2005. 353 pp. £19.99

ISBN 0281057583

Esler is attempting to promote an entirely new model for New Testament theology, in contrast to the approach to biblical theology first theorised by Johann Philipp Gabler in 1787. He reviews the work of key scholars in this field since Gabler, in particular focussing on the work of David Strauss, William Wrede, Adolf Schlatter, Rudolf Bultmann, Krister Stendahl, Robert Morgan, Heikki Raisanen and Francis Watson, prior to presenting his own position. In contrast to the approaches of these scholars Esler proposed a model of dialogue and communion between the first Christ-followers and people today using a 'socio-theological model of persons in communion' as the central feature of his ecclesiology (36-7). After outlining his basic presuppositions, space is devoted to defending the possibility of obtaining reliable knowledge from the New Testament period in the light of recent scepticism and arguing a case for the non-literary character of New Testament texts, an insight deemed essential for interpreting their authors' communicative intentions. Esler commended Frederick Schleiermacher's hermeneutics as the basis for interpreting the New Testament in a way that does justice to its oral and interpersonal origins. A chapter is devoted to using I Corinthians 10-14 as a test case for his thesis, followed by one arguing for the minimal effect of written over against oral communication in the early Christian period. Chapters eight to ten explore the meaning of 'the communion of the saints', as a way of maintaining the presence of the deceased New Testament authors among modern Christians, followed by comments in the final two chapters on the canon of Scripture and the Epistle to the Romans, in the light of Esler's thesis.

Book Reviews

This reviewer appreciated the critical response to the theories of Derrida and Gadamer in chapter three, with assistance from the insights of E. D. Hirsch and his support for the importance of authorial intentions, though Kevin Vanhoozer's *Is there a meaning in this text?* is a better work to consult on this topic. Also Esler is right to stress the importance of oral communications in the early Christian communities, though it is possible he estimates literacy levels at too low a level amongst Palestinian Jews in the Roman period (175). Esler rightly acknowledges the importance to the early Christians of named authors for the documents, but struggles to make his point on this matter given his belief that many of the New Testament documents were pseudonymous (177-81). He was on stronger ground in presenting NT evidence for not just 'future resurrection but also evidence for a separable soul and disembodied existence in the period prior to the parousia' (241). This book was enjoyable to read but it was not produced for congregational leaders or general Christian readers, though it is a welcome contribution in its field of academic scholarship.

Brian Talbot, Cumbernauld

The Christ of the Prophets

O. Palmer Robertson

P&R Publishing Company, Phillipsburg, New Jersey, 2004. 553 pp.
£24.99

ISBN 0875525644

Once in a while, among the multitude of books produced, there is one which is truly outstanding and promises to be a standard work for many years to come. Such a book is Palmer Robertson's *The Christ of the Prophets*. Those familiar with his earlier works, notably *The Christ of the Covenants*, will not be disappointed with this magisterial work. Robertson combines historical expertise with theological incisiveness as he sweeps

through the remarkable and unparalleled flowering of prophecy in Israel. He begins with a survey of the origins of prophetic ministry showing both the similarities and profound differences with surrounding cultures. This is followed by a useful account of true and false prophecy. There is a particularly useful section on the relationship of prophecy and Torah with an illuminating section on prophetic use of the Decalogue and prophetic comment on the covenants. The prophets are then surveyed historically and the place of prediction in prophecy is analysed. The book ends with a masterly survey of exile and restoration which Robertson sees as the focal event for the prophets. The book combines skill and comprehensiveness in survey with penetrating comments on individual prophets. Scholarship is engaged with in an incisive and robust manner. Indeed one of the main values of the book is its analyses of individual prophets which combine solid engagement with the text with many fresh insights. The analysis of Isaiah not only questions the multiple authorship of the book but presents a satisfying survey of the book as a whole. Jeremiah has long been the despair of analysts looking for a structure, and thus Robertson's ingenious attempt to find a unifying thread in the six key words of the prophet's call, while it may not convince everyone, is a stimulating suggestion which deserves further study. The section on the seventy sevens (Dan. 9: 24-27) is perhaps the most illuminating thing I have read on that passage. Every student and Bible teacher should have this book on their shelves and use it regularly to refresh their thinking and preaching. I would recommend it as the first port of call for stimulus on individual prophets. It is possible to question some matters: the comments on Amos and Micah seemed less incisive than much of the rest of the book. But these are quibbles. This book will more than repay its price. You will find

yourself turning to it again and again and finding not only information but a warm and infectious love of Scripture; your own preaching will richly benefit.

Bob Fyall, Edinburgh

Decoding Da Vinci: The Challenge of Historic Christianity and Fantasy

N. T. Wright (with Ian Paul)

Grove Biblical Series, Cambridge, 2006. 28 pp. £2.95

ISBN 1365490X

Coded Messages: Evangelism and the Da Vinci Code

Steve Hollinghurst

Grove/Church Army Evangelism Series, Cambridge, 2006. 28 pp. £2.95

ISBN 1851746145

Plainly *The Da Vinci Code* has become one of the altars to the unknown god in our society that provides many evangelistic opportunities as people discuss the book and the film and the issues these raise. These two rather different booklets engage with these issues and are interesting contributions to the debate.

The booklet by Bishop Tom has all the robust and lucid argument and great learning lightly worn which we have come to expect from him. He demonstrates clearly and ruthlessly the power of myth and the way in which Dan Brown draws heavily from other such fantasy writing as well as many errors of fact in the book. In Chapter 3 we are given an exposure of the widespread myth of Christian origins which draws heavily on the so-called Gnostic Gospels with their body/spirit dualism and their rejection of history.

Chapters 4 and 5 unfold the canonical message as Tom Wright draws on his magisterial works on Jesus in the context of Palestinian Judaism and underlines his emphases on the bodily resurrection and the fulfilment by Jesus of God's age-old purposes.

This booklet will dispel the fog in many minds and may encourage those who have not done so to read Tom Wright's larger works listed under 'Further Reading'. Ian Paul contributes useful questions for further reflection and an appendix. Steve Hollinghurst's booklet, reflecting the different Grove series, concentrates on the cultural milieu which the book reflects and how Christians might engage with this. He makes much of what he calls 'Code culture' with its openness to alternative spiritualities, suspicion of authority and belief in conspiracy theories which are central to *The Da Vinci Code's* appeal. He also analyses the appeal of the 'sacred feminine' alleged to be central to the Gnostic writings. Chapter 4 outlines ways to run events engaging with the book. He makes valid points here such as the importance of venue and of engaging in genuine debate. However, he rather unfairly caricatures the conservative approach. The kind of attitude exemplified in 'The event you should not run' would be held by those who see no need to run an event at all. The ten theological points at the end of the chapter vary in cogency, although, to be fair, he accepts that not all will agree with him. It is necessary to engage with the issues raised by *The Da Vinci Code* and these booklets will be resources in that task.

Bob Fyall, Edinburgh

2 Kings: The Power and the Fury (Focus on the Bible)

Dale Ralph Davis

Christian Focus Publications, Fearn, 2005. 344 pp. £9.99

ISBN 1845500962

Any commentary by Dale Ralph Davis is now eagerly awaited by many readers and they will not be disappointed with this one, especially if they have read his earlier volume on 1 Kings. As he notes in his preface, this brings to a conclusion his series on the

'Former Prophets' which provide a rich resource for all those who preach on these fascinating but often difficult books. He describes his work as 'expositional commentaries' which shows his desire to be of particular help to the preacher; he is certainly that. The word which comes to mind about this commentary is 'sparkling'; the sheer exuberance of his encounter with the text and the way he shows its living power is a joy to read. This is seen even in his titles for the expositions of particular passages. Here are a few: The peril of church suppers (2 Kgs 4: 8-37); The lady who saved Christmas (2 Kgs 11) – some will remember hearing a version of that at the SMA 2003; Can a Reformation save us? (2 Kgs 22: 1 – 23:30). Once again he illustrates his expositions with an astonishing variety of stories ranging from Arizona to Aberdeen and the American Civil War to the Scottish Covenanters. None of this should give the idea that this commentary is a piece of lightweight fun. Davis has done his homework, thought deeply through the issues, and preached this material himself. Some examples of his acute theological mind and exegetical insights are: the defence of the historicity of Elijah's departure to heaven and its theological implication (2 Kgs 2); true and false worship (2 Kgs 16); the insightful analysis of the often neglected last section with its hope for the future (2 Kgs 25:27-30).

He has also delved deeply into the critical issues involved. The footnotes show detailed acquaintance with ancient sources, such as the Assyrian annals as well as contemporary studies. This is seen, for example, in his comments on the puzzling chronology of Ahaz and Hezekiah and the date of Sennacherib's invasion. These and similar comments are not intrusive but are there to undergird the exposition. Above all 2 Kings is always placed in the flow of the canon as a whole.

Book Reviews

This is a must for all who want to preach on OT narrative. For students it will provide robust and stimulating material; for preachers it will give a model and a challenge.

My one regret is that, since I am writing a commentary on 1 & 2 Kings, I am left continually wondering what else I can say.

Bob Fyall, Edinburgh

The Shaming of the Strong: The Challenge of an Unborn Life

Sarah Williams

Kingsway Publications, Eastbourne, 2005. 176 pp. £6.99

ISBN 1842911791

How do you pastor a family who discover, during a pregnancy, that their much-looked-forward-to-child has a severe 'abnormality'?

Sarah and Paul are both associate professors at Regent College, Vancouver – Sarah in Church History, and Paul in Marketplace Theology. Their third daughter, Cerian, was diagnosed prenatally as having a condition incompatible with life outside the womb. Used to the cut and thrust of academic debate, Sarah's book contains not just their narrative, but clear and helpful workings-through of the ethical and theological issues involved in their decision-making. It is out of this context of academic achievement, however, that the title comes. At Cerian's funeral Sarah declares in her tribute: 'You were not precious to me because of the things you did. Your worth was written into your being from the very first moment of your existence.'

Is this a book you could give a couple going through a similar experience? The vast majority of couples in this situation opt for a termination and so couples who do not can feel very alone. This book, which can be read in a few hours, will help them to feel less isolated. For some, Sarah's relatively comfortable, middle-class life will be hard to relate to, and the ethical and theo-

Book Reviews

logical discussions may be heavy going. It is not a formal resource book – there is no index or reference section or list of helpful agencies. It will, however, be a valued resource: ways to help other children in the family, ways for family, friends, pastors, colleagues, GPs and hospital staff to make the journey easier. Sarah's story is at times completely heartbreakingly but ultimately uplifting, showing that God loves and treasures the damaged, and calls us to do the same. She writes honestly, humanly and with humour in a way that is likely to intrigue the non-Christian. It is a book to be read and given away, time and time again.

Karen Palmer, East Kilbride

Friends, Partners or Spouses (The Civil Partnership Act and Christian Witness)

Andrew Goddard

Grove Books Limited, Cambridge, 2006. 32 pp. £2.95

ISSN 1470854X

Andrew Goddard and his publishers are to be commended for providing the Church with such an informative and insightful booklet so soon after the Civil Partnership Act 2004 came into force. In five short chapters Dr Goddard gives us an overview of the Act and the philosophy behind it; the response of the Church of England to the Act in the context of Christianity's historic attitude towards marriage; and concludes with some theological reflections on why entering a civil partnership would be incompatible with a profession of faith in the Lordship of Christ.

The value of this booklet is in its breadth and brevity. Though only 32 pages of A5 it examines the law, canon law, ethics, human rights and Scripture. Dr Goddard surely speaks for us all when he states in the 'Acknowledgements' that 'The more I have looked into the subject of civil partnerships the more I realise how complex are the legal and ethical issues... and

how little I fully understand the significance of this important development in our national and church life.' Civil partnerships are intended to 'bring the law and practice into line with the reality of people's lives' (government minister Barbara Roche in 2002). The result is that this new legal relationship gives people of the same gender almost exactly the same rights and responsibilities as a man and woman entering into marriage. This includes the prohibited degrees of relationship, so that a man cannot marry his ex-civil partner's mother if his ex-civil partner is still alive. The Scottish section of the Act (Part 3) gives civil partners the same protection as 'battered wives', with provision for interdicts and exclusion orders.

What I had failed to appreciate until I read this booklet is that anyone in a civil partnership is not free to marry; it is an impediment to marriage. It is an offence to marry and to officiate at the marriage of someone who is still legally a civil partner. This clashes head-on with our Christian view of marriage and could be a source of conflict. The booklet is written from the perspective of the Church of England. But rather than off-putting, I found this a fascinating peek into the workings of a denomination I know little about. I was particularly interested to note that the House of Bishops has seen no need to alter the Church's teaching on marriage and homosexuality, and has decided not to produce an authorised public liturgy in connection with civil partnerships. This stands in stark contrast with the Legal Questions of the Church of Scotland which used the passing of the CP Act as its rationale for trying to introduce legislation permitting the 'marking of a civil partnership' by clergy. Finally, Dr Goddard's notes at the end of the booklet are themselves priceless. Two websites in particular may be of interest to readers of this Journal:

www.sarmiento.plus.com/cofe/humphreys.html (arguing that civil partnerships are same-sex marriages) and www.robagnon.net (rebutting arguments that Scripture does not condemn all homosexual practice). Dr Goddard claims that his thinking on these questions is not a finished product. If that is the case, then we should thank God that Dr Goddard is on our side.

Ian Watson, Kirkmuirhill

Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Post-modern Cultures

Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger

SPCK, London, 2006. 340 pp. £12.99
ISBN 0281057915

This is one of the more thorough of the many pieces of work on emerging churches. The decline and end of Christendom, of modernism, of inherited church models are subjects that are being widely covered. Emerging churches are being written about and commended to us as relevant vehicles for Christian nurture and service today. For some it is the search for meaningful worship that has led them to try newer forms of church; for others a search for deeper community, and for others a concern to relate and commend Christian faith in a changed and changing world. Gibbs and Bolger between 2000 and 2005 interviewed 50 leaders of emerging churches and analysed a lot of information and data. The fifty leaders, from the UK and USA, are featured in their own words in a hundred-page appendix. This appendix provides a very lively and thought-provoking series of vignettes. Chapter one is an outline of how, and how much, our culture is changing and is followed by a look at 'what is the emerging church?'. The authors write 'Having offered tentative descriptions of practice, Jesus, post-modernity and community, we are now ready to offer our definition of emerging churches:

Emerging churches are communities that practice the way of Jesus within post-modern cultures. This definition encompasses the nine practices. Emerging churches (1) identify with the life of Jesus, (2) transform the secular realm, and (3) live highly communal lives. Because of these three activities, they (4) welcome the stranger, (5) serve with generosity, (6) participate as producers, (7) create as created beings, (8) lead as a body, and (9) take part in spiritual activities' (p. 44-5). These nine practices are given a chapter each in the remainder of the book. In looking at each of these, familiar themes are covered: the *missio Dei*, the Kingdom of God, participative worship, whole-life spirituality, faith as a journey, creation-centred theology, and so on. The authors are enthusiastic about emerging church, and highlight many important aspects of what is going on, many serious challenges to the wider church, and give encouraging instances and examples of what is being done.

But – I was left frustrated. Often the contrasts drawn by way of commending emerging church are not contrasts between emerging and inherited models, but contrast between good and bad practice: 'More than simply offering a message of personal salvation, Jesus invited his followers to participate in God's redemption of the world. Emerging churches have adopted this restored understanding of the gospel...' (p. 106). Surely they are not alone in this? Sometimes false dichotomies or choices are put before us: '[emerging leaders]... all regard evangelism in terms of an open-ended conversation and an embodied way of life as distinct from a result-gearred confrontation' (p. 80). Are these our only alternatives? Again, sometimes characteristics are claimed for emerging church that we should expect anywhere church is being done well: 'Commitment that is deep and long lasting is a strongly held value in emerging churches' (p. 105).

So what exactly is emerging church and what does it have to say to the rest of us? Undoubtedly a large variety of approaches are being tried today for the various reasons I mentioned in my first paragraph. We all need to be challenged to reflect harder on our worship, our nurture and community, and our mission in today's world. Those who are in 'emerging churches' can help us. And this book is a good tool for that. But whether there is something that is emerging that will become a distinct approach to church is another question. The challenge here is not whether or not we should be doing 'emerging church' so much as whether or not we will work hard at doing church in a way that connects with many whose style, values, culture is so very far removed from where we are starting. And whether our message says 'come and be like us' or whether it creates communities of believers who remain in very different cultural clothes.

Gordon Palmer, East Kilbride

From the Abundance of the Heart

Stephen Cottrell

Darton, Longman & Todd, London, 2006. 140 pp. £10.95

ISBN 0232526362

This is the third statement of Stephen Cottrell's approach to putting mission at the heart of congregational life. In 1996 there was his Grove booklet 'Sacrament, Wholeness and Evangelism' (still one of my favourites of many Groves that I have read). A couple of years later DLT published 'Catholic Evangelism', an extending and developing of the theme of being a missionary church. Now we are given a fuller and deeper work on a similar theme. Cottrell is keen to affirm his Anglo-Catholic roots and will point out what he considers to be Catholic emphases or distinctives along the way. He is also one of the contributors to the Emmaus material and much of what he says and

Book Reviews

writes fits in well with a more explicitly and more party-line evangelicalism. This book is in two parts. The first, 'God's Vision for an Evangelising Church' sets out the importance of prayer, of seeking God's will not ours, and of our being shaped by the encounter between living faith and the world around us. Three short chapters are followed by a sermon, a conversation and a reflective 'intermission' before we move to part two. There, 'The Ministry of Evangelism', a model for evangelism, building a place of nurture, contacting people, conversion, building faith and community and evangelising worship are the chapter themes, leading to a closing meditation. The book is devout, refreshingly plain, clearly thought out, very practical. Much of the material has been used when Cottrell was employed as a missioner in the Church of England, and is the fruit of both serious thought and research and active involvement in congregational life both as vicar and as mission enabler. Cottrell uses the Emmaus Road themes a lot: the importance of listening as well as speaking, of accompaniment, of faith as a journey of discovery and so on. He urges churches to have a mission statement that actively shapes what we are about, to be fresh and active and creative in making new contacts, in faithfully sharing faith and serving people, in giving clear opportunities for people to come to faith, in careful and caring nurture, in our calling to be apostles as well as disciples, to build communities of care for one another. He is passionate and positive about the opportunities for congregations to become disciple-making communities who mobilise members to share actively in God's mission in the world. It would be hard to find another so well set out, loving, clear, wide-reaching book on church evangelism. Highly recommended.

Gordon Palmer, East Kilbride

Book Reviews

Teaching Amos: Unlocking the Prophecy of Amos for the Bible Teacher

Bob Fyall

Christian Focus Publications (with Proclamation Trust), Fearn, 2006.
160 pp. £6.99

ISBN 184550142X

'We cannot understand Christ unless we engage with the Old Testament' (p. 7) writes Bob Fyall in his Preface, which surely gives sufficient reason for every Christian to read the Old Testament, and every Christian preacher to preach and teach it. Yet the moment we seek to do so, whether preaching a series of sermons or leading a Bible Study, we are confronted with questions and issues surrounding interpretation and application, especially in the light of Jesus' coming, and then also of division and presentation of material. Most of us need help. And here in relation to Amos, in particular, is a book which specifically sets out to give 'guidance and encouragement to those who want to preach and teach Amos, but are uncertain how to go about it' (p. 157). That's its stated aim. Undoubtedly it succeeds.

The opening chapter is introductory and covers some comments on the Old Testament prophets in general; a focus on Amos – the man, his message, his place as a role model for preaching, and an outline of the book; a brief section on 'Preaching Christ from Amos' where there is the important reminder: 'Christ is *the* revelation of the God whom Amos preaches' (p. 17); it concludes with a longer and very helpful section, 'Planning a Preaching Series on Amos', which gives three possible series of nine, six and five sermons respectively, all with some great suggestions for titles for the series and the individual sermons (including a couple of paragraphs on the whole matter of using sermon titles!). The next nine chapters – the heart of the book – take up the first sug-

gested series of nine sermons with one chapter devoted to each sermon. Each chapter follows a sermon outline with headings, in which a summary exposition of the set verses is given covering interpretation of the text, lines drawn towards Christ and the New Testament, and suggestions for areas of potential contemporary application. Each chapter concludes with a section, 'Preaching and Teaching Notes' which highlights particular matters for attention when preaching the particular chapter or verses. (In the 'Preaching and Teaching Notes' section in chapter 4 there is a particularly helpful excursus on 'Preaching on Judgement'.) The final chapter considers five of the major themes of Amos. In this, for example 'Amos' Social Concerns' are highlighted and some helpful comments given on preaching and applying these social concerns today. The appendix also gives some brief thoughts on the usefulness of the various commentaries on Amos. This is an invaluable little book, worth every penny, giving practical help in moving from text to sermon and then in planning a preaching series, and in all of these ways meeting real need. It also brings us face to face with the God of Amos. I'm sure that anyone, at whatever age and stage of preaching and teaching ministry, could derive much benefit from this book and so will their hearers. I happily commend it and look forward to other titles in the series.

David Scott, Dundee

Paul: Fresh Perspectives

N. T. Wright

SPCK, London 2005. 195 pp. £12.99
ISBN 0281057397

N. T. Wright, the Bishop of Durham, is a prolific author and speaker. This short volume is the publication of a series of lectures, the Hulsean Lectures in Cambridge, with only a small amount of editing and additional material added. Although a

short volume this is not a simplified introduction to what Bishop Wright calls the 'fresh perspective' on Paul.

In his writing and speaking Wright is at pains to distinguish his thinking on Paul for what has become known as the 'new perspective' on Paul: see the various works of E. P. Sanders and J. D. G. Dunn. If you want to read Wright engaging directly with Sanders and Dunn this is not the volume for you; however, if you want in brief measure to read Wright's position you will find it here.

The book is in two parts, each with four chapters. Part I deals with themes in Paul. After a significant introductory chapter Wright discusses pairs of themes: Creation and Covenant, Messiah and Apocalyptic, Gospel and Empire. It is in the tension or dialectic conversation between these pairs that Wright finds his fresh perspective on Paul. The foundation for this dialectic study of Paul is laid by Wright in his exposition of Paul's world, or worlds. Paul is to be understood as inhabiting three worlds: Second-Temple Judaism, Greek, and Roman. It is in this context we read, 'The church, the assembly of Jesus the Messiah, formed (in Paul's view) a world of its own, standing in a unique relation to the other three worlds, and deriving from them, in various overlapping ways, the sundry dynamics which caused Paul so many problems' (p. 6). Part II moves on to consider the structures of Paul's theology. Wright is unhappy with traditional systematic theologians' ways of describing Paul's theological framework. 'The obvious place to begin is with the shape of classic Jewish theology ... when Jewish writers have taken it upon themselves to summarize what Jews believe, they have focused upon two topics, with a third not far behind' (p. 83). Wright describes these topics as monotheism and election with the third being eschatology. A close relationship between these topics is described with each being influenced by firstly, a re-reading of Israel's Scriptures,

secondly, a recognition that 'Paul's main polemical target is not Judaism ... but paganism' (p. 85), and thirdly the task of preaching the Gospel.

I have noted that this is a short book with only six and a half pages of notes and two and half pages of bibliography. Nevertheless the book does effectively gather together the thinking of one of the keenest thinkers and writers on Paul of our time.

Not everyone will be persuaded by Wright's analysis or conclusions; I am not fully persuaded myself. However there is value in reading and giving careful consideration to this book. Wright tells us 'it is, I think, a time for exploration and delighted innovation rather than simply for filling in the paradigms left by our predecessors' (p. ix), and then 'The church and the academy both urgently need a new generation of teachers and preachers who will give themselves totally to the delighted study of the text and allow themselves to be taken wherever it leads, to think new thoughts arising out of the text and to dare to try them out in word and deed' (p. x). A commitment to such a study of the text of Scripture, and a display of such courage as to move beyond the received and traditional ways of expressing our understanding of Scripture, is surely to be commended, even if all of the conclusions cannot be. No doubt Wright will continue to be hailed by some as an inspired visionary and condemned by others as abandoning the truth of the Gospel. It is worth the time and effort to make up your own mind by reading this book (and his other books as well!).

Gordon Kennedy, Stranraer

Learning for Ministry

Steven Croft and Roger Walton

Church House Publishing, London, 2005. 210 pp. £12.99

ISBN 0715140531

'This whole book is about helping to shape appropriate expectations so

that you get the most from your training.' This one sentence tells us almost everything about this book, what it is about and for whom it is written. Steven Croft and Roger Walton have both been involved in training people for ministry, Steven for eight years as Warden of Cranmer Hall, Durham, training people for ministry within the Church of England and Roger as Director of the Wesley Study Centre within the Methodist Church. Here they distil a great deal of wisdom gleaned from many years' teaching.

Everything you might ever want to know about the process of ministry formation is here. There are four main sections: knowing God better, knowing yourself better, understanding the church, and understanding and caring for God's world. There are chapters on prayer, studying the Bible, engaging with the history and traditions of the church, as well as discerning and nurturing gifts and skills for ministry, and a helpful introduction to the theology of mission. The fifth section is all about ways in which people learn. The book is designed to be used as a reflective tool. All the way through there are topics for reflection, allowing the reader time to mull over and apply what has just been said. There are also a number of Bible passages to read and on which to reflect, all designed to give the reader time to consider their calling to ministry and the nature of the ministry to which they may sense that call. 'If God is calling you to ministry, this is what that calling will mean in the formation process!'

Learning for Ministry has a very clear target readership. It is written for those who are thinking about a call to ministry. It is also written to them in a very direct and personal style, as if these two authors were in conversation with you. It is full of personal examples, illustrating almost every chapter by someone else's previous experience. This book fills a gap in the market. To my knowledge there has been no

Book Reviews

book like this before. Its one weakness, from my point of view, is that for Scottish candidates the examples and illustrations all come from an English context, but that is a very small niggle. This will be a most valuable book; I would recommend it to everyone who is contemplating ministry within the churches; you will go into the training and formation process with your eyes open and your vision enlarged.

James S. Dewar, Juniper Green, Edinburgh

Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications

D. A. Carson

Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 2005. 250

pp. £8.99

ISBN 0310259479

ISBN 9780310259473

The Emerging (or Emergent) Church is a catch-all term popularly used to describe amorphous groups of new church networks that are bombarding the evangelical community with prophetic calls to adapt to postmodern culture or risk suffering the fate of the dodo. Examples of Emergent thinking are found in the attractively written books and articles of Brian McLaren, Leonard Sweet and others.

The challenge of relating the Gospel to culture is not new. Richard Niebuhr's famous typology of five broad Christian responses to culture manifested through the centuries reminds us that the church has found it notoriously difficult to find a consensus on this issue. So perhaps we ought not to be surprised that the Emergent debate is confused and confusing, and we can be grateful to Don Carson for offering a biblical and theological analysis. Carson comes across as being in basic sympathy with the Emergent desire to read postmodern culture in all its complexities with a view to reaching a generation shaped by postmodern assumptions. But

Book Reviews

while Carson's approach is eirenic, he is incisive and penetrating in his critique. Emergent rests its case for reform of church and doctrine on its evaluation of contemporary culture, but Carson finds Emergent wanting here due to an interpretive schizophrenia that rejects modernity as absolutist while treating postmodernity with kid gloves. Such an approach is 'intellectually incoherent' and 'theologically shallow' for it fails to see that postmodernity, no less than modernity, has as its starting point the finite human 'I'. Carson also finds Emergent manipulative, presenting us with a false epistemological choice: either we humans know something absolutely or we can glimpse only some small perspective of it. But the real choice, according to Carson, is not between absolute knowledge (which only God possesses) and a perspectivalism that prevents us from knowing anything objectively for sure. It is possible for us to know the truth because the God of truth reveals this to us in an ordered creation and through his redemptive action in history. We may know the truth only partially, for human knowledge is a tiny sub-set of God's knowledge, but we can know it. The problem with modernity is not *absolutism* per se (God's commandments are absolute, Jesus' claim in John 14:6 is absolute), but *absolutists*, i.e. people who yield to the lust to become like God. Emergent's ambivalence on issues like homosexual practice and world religions contrasts markedly with Paul's views in Romans 1 and Acts 17. But is this not what happens when you allow culture to be the arbiter of Scripture? Emergent's enthusiasm for postmodernity is rendering it unable to adopt a biblically balanced approach to culture. The Gospel is *pro* culture and we must contextualise it in whatever culture we live; but it is also *counter* culture, obliging us to challenge the mores of the culture wherever they depart from biblical norms. Carson's book, like his ongoing dialogue with certain Emergent leaders,

is a call to Emergent to do some serious biblical exegesis and to face up squarely to the truth claims of Scripture.

Fergus Macdonald, Edinburgh
